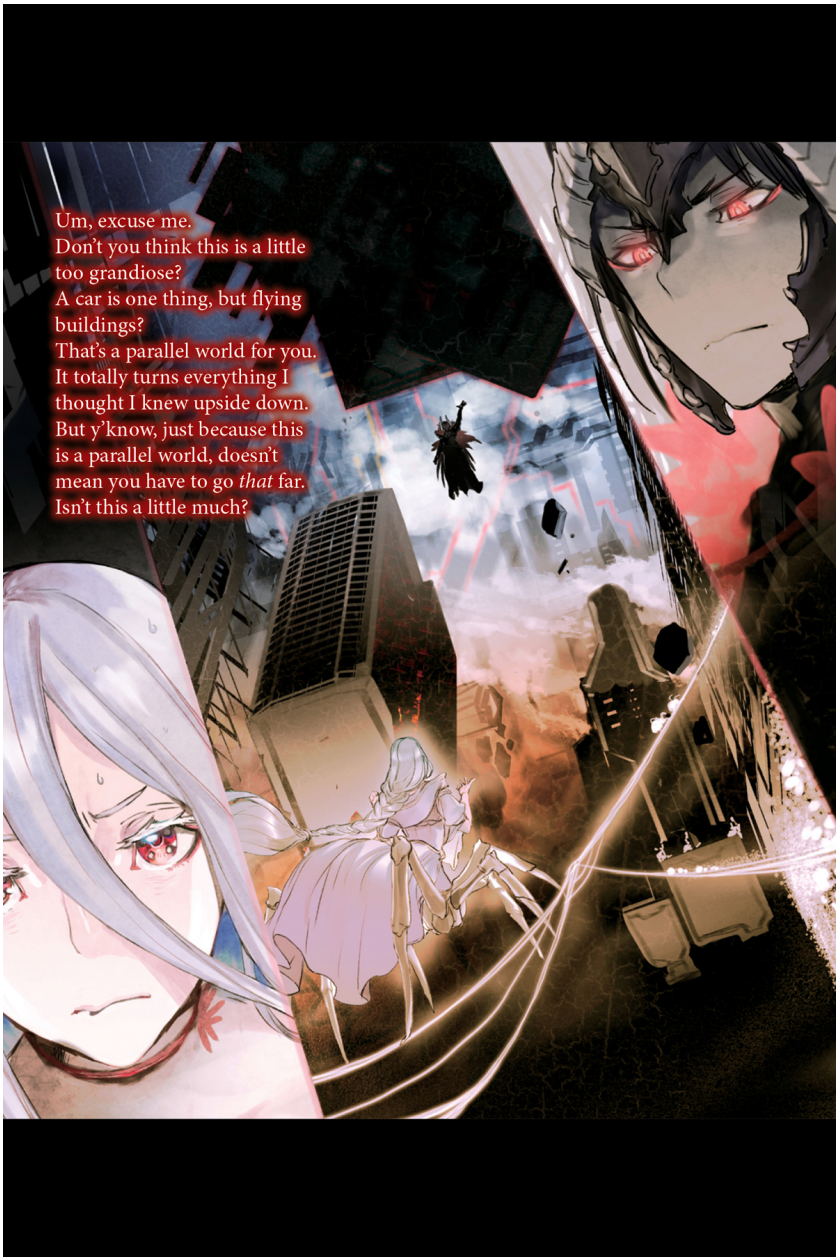
So I'm a Spider, So What?
16
OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU


Um, excuse me.
Don't you think this is a little too grandiose?
A car is one thing, but flying buildings?
That's a parallel world for you.
It totally turns everything I thought I knew upside down.
But y'know, just because this is a parallel world, doesn't mean you have to go *that* far.
Isn't this a little much?

No, wait! This is terrible!
At this rate, mankind
will be doomed!
We had it all wrong!
The "evil god" isn't the
ivory god!

So I'm a Spider, So What? 16

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 16
Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon
Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KUMO DESUGA, NANIKA? Vol. 16
©Okina Baba, Tsukasa Kiryu 2022
First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2023 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: June 2023
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell
Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Baba, Okina, author. | Kiryu, Tsukasa, illustrator. | McKeon, Jenny, translator.
Title: So I'm a spider, so what? / Okina Baba ; illustration by Tsukasa Kiryu ; translation by Jenny McKeon.
Other titles: Kumo desuga nanika. English | So I am a spider, so what?
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017–
Identifiers: LCCN 2017034911 | ISBN 9780316412896 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442886 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442909 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442916 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301941 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301965 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301989 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975398996 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975310349 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975310363 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975310387 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975321826 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975339852 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975341756 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975352165 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975352189 (v. 16 : pbk.)
Subjects: CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Spiders—Fiction. | Monsters—Fiction. | Prisons—Fiction. | Escapes—Fiction. | Fantasy.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.O44 So 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017034911

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-5218-9 (paperback)
978-1-9753-5219-6 (ebook)

E3-20230520-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Ariel 1
White 1
Shun 1
Balto
Sophia
Kusama
Phelmina
Merazophis
Kunihiko
Asaka
Wrath
Filimøs
Shun 2
Ariel 2
Dustin
Hyrince
Ronandt
Fei
Shun 3

Dark Dragon Reise
Ariel 3
White 2
Everyone’s Ever After
Epilogue

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS
Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

Merazophis

FOURTH ARMY COMMANDER

He served the Keren family as a butler until their land was attacked, and Sophia turned him into a vampire. Now that the lord and lady he served are gone, he has devoted all his efforts to protecting Sophia.

Güliedistodiez

NINTH ARMY COMMANDER

A god and administrator of the world and its system. Dragons and wyrms serve him as part of his dominion.

Phelmina

TENTH ARMY OFFICER

She was once a student at the academy Sophia attends, but due to various circumstances, she had her fiancé stolen, was chased out of school, and even got cut off by her family. Left without a family name, Phelmina was taken in by White and trained as a skilled secret agent.

Puppet Taratect Sisters

Their human girl-like appearances are puppets, with their real bodies being small spider monsters that control the puppet from within. They originally served Ariel, but now they've become attached to White.

Ael

Levelheaded but also rather shrewd, she is the de facto eldest sister.

Sael

Can't do anything except what she's ordered to do.

Riel

A mysterious being who's often staring into space or exhibiting other bizarre behavior.

Fiel

A friendly, mischievous, and energetic girl

Ariel

DEMON LORD

She was born during Potimas's immortality experiments as a human-spider chimera. After she was rescued from Potimas's lab, she was raised in the goddess Sariel's orphanage, but the effects of her own poison on her body made her very frail. Eventually, she was appointed as the current demon lord and began preparing to take down Potimas, only to find her hands full dealing with the sudden appearance of a mysterious spider monster in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, with whom she ultimately decided to form an alliance.

White

TENTH ARMY COMMANDER

Also known as Shiraori, the White Weaver. A reincarnation with memories of being a high school student in Japan, she retains the memories of Hiiro Wakaba. She was reborn as a weak monster in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, and survived all kinds of harrowing ordeals; eventually, this led to her being feared by humans as the "Nightmare of the Labyrinth," and she was the very same spider monster who caused trouble for Demon Lord Ariel. She achieved deification by absorbing the energy of a bomb said to be capable of destroying a continent.

Sophia Keren

VAMPIRE

The only child of Lord Keren of Sariella. In her previous life as Shouko Negishi, she was so dark and spooky that her classmates called her "Rihoko" ("real horror girl"). In this life, she was reborn as a progenitor vampire, though vampires previously no longer existed in this world.

Wrath

EIGHTH ARMY COMMANDER

In his previous life, he was known as Kyouya Sasajima. Reborn as a goblin, he lived a happy life at first but lost his village and family to an attack by the imperial army. Later, he lost his sense of self and was on a wild rampage until Ariel and White saved him, and he ended up joining the demon army. He and Schlain the Hero were close friends in their previous life, but now their positions put them in direct opposition.

Yuri

SAINT-TO-BE

A candidate for sainthood from the Holy Kingdom of Alleius. In her previous life, she was known as Yui Hasebe. She's become a fervent believer in the Word of God religion. Her fondness for Shun is a holdover from her previous life.

Hugo

Before being reincarnated as the prince of the Renxandt Empire, his name was Kengo Natsume. The internal strife in the empire affected him and twisted his personality, giving him an inflated ego. Under White's control, he spearheaded the coup in the Analeit Kingdom and the invasion on the elf village.

Kunihiko/Asaka

In their previous lives, their names were Kunihiko Tagawa and Asaka Kushitani. They were childhood friends in both lives. In this world, they were born and raised in the human-demon borderlands, but the demon Merazophis suddenly appeared one day and wiped out their clan. Having lost everything, they took on their old names and became adventurers, becoming relatively famous for their exploits.

Sachi Kudo

The former class rep, she is now the mediator of the reincarnations in the elf village. She was sold to the elves by her parents when she was young. In her former life, she got along well with their teacher, Ms. Oka, but their closely monitored life in the village has led her to harbor mistrust and animosity toward her former teacher.

Shinobu Kusama

A secret agent for the Word of God religion. He has always strongly believed in the "if you can't beat them, join them" philosophy, and was often used as a gofer in his previous life. In the battle of the elf village, his role was to destroy the teleport gates with exploding swords.

Shun

HERO

A reincarnation who was reborn as the fourth prince of the Analeit Kingdom. In his previous life, as Shunsuke Yamada, he was a thoroughly average boy, but in this life he is not only a prince but a hero, having unfortunately inherited the title. He is always pursuing the ideal of his beloved older brother Julius, the previous hero.

Katia

Once a high school boy named Kanata Ooshima, but was reincarnated as the daughter of a duke. She was brainwashed by Hugo until the condition was broken by the loss of her life, at which moment Shun saved her. After that incident, she has resolved to live as a woman in both body and mind, and now she holds the position of Shun's closest female companion.

Fei

In her previous life, she was known as Mirei Shinohara, but was reborn as a dragon. Once she formed a contract with Shun, she evolved from an earth wyrm into a light wyrm. She now has the ability to take human form and often does so, but she still retains the power of a light wyrm. In terms of pure stats, she might actually be stronger than Shun.

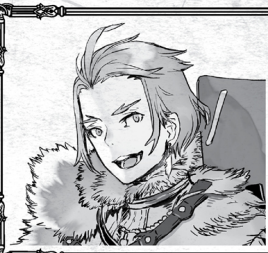
Filimøs

As Ms. Kanami Okazaki, she was teacher to Shun and the others. Reborn as an elf, she has worked tirelessly since infancy to protect her students with all her might. Since she was born and raised in the elf village, where Potimas's rule is absolute, she is convinced that "administrators are the enemy."

Ronandt Orozoi

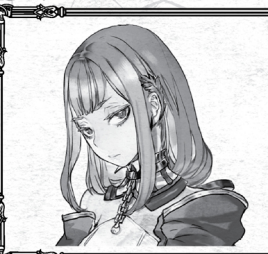
HEAD MAGE OF THE IMPERIAL ARMY

An eccentric old man who was so enthralled with the magic he witnessed from the "Nightmare of the Labyrinth" that he entered the Great Elroe Labyrinth alone to train under the creature. However, he is without a doubt humanity's strongest mage. He is one of the few fearless warriors who fought against Potimas's mechanical weapons in the battle of the elf village and lived. In that battle, he teamed up with the Puppet Taratect Sisters and befriended them.



Hyrince Quarto

Second son of Duke Quarto of the Analeit Kingdom. He was a childhood friend of Julius and a member of his hero party. After Julius fell in battle, he joined Shun's party and led them to the elf village as an elder brother figure. His true identity: a double of Güliedistodiez.



Sue

The second princess of Analeit Kingdom, and Shun's half-sister. She is obsessed with her brother to the point of directing an actual death glare at anyone who gets close to him. She agrees to cooperate with White to guarantee Shun's safety.

PREVIOUSLY... story

The world quest issued by Administrator D has plunged mankind into chaos. Now that the Taboo skill has been installed in everyone's minds, the events and memories of the past have been revealed. Black aims to keep humanity alive, while White aims to revive the goddess. As the long battle between these two gods begins, Administrator D interferes yet again. Now every living person in the world has the ability to choose, Black or White, and give more strength to one of them by praying…?!

Potimas

The leader of the elf village. He has been alive since before the creation of the existence, and is in fact the main cause of the events that brought the world to the brink of destruction. He worked behind the scenes all over the world for the sole purpose of achieving immortality…only to be forced off the stage by the appearance of the irregular known as White.

ELF

Dustin LXI

WORD OF GOD PONTIFF

Holder of a skill that reincarnates him with his memories intact each time he dies. He retains his memories from before the creation of the system to the present day, and devotes his many lives to protecting humanity and saving the world.

WORD OF GOD

Sariel

A lost angel. The Word of God religion considers her voice the Word of God, while the goddess religion worships her as a goddess. She offered herself up as the core pillar of the system in order to save humanity from destruction, and keeps the system running even as it whittles away at her.

GODDESS

Administrator D

EVIL GOD

A particularly powerful god of the highest tier. All she cares about is being entertained. As an evil trickster, she'll meddle in the story as much as she can, but otherwise watches from the sidelines.

ADMINISTRATOR

Ariel 1

“Now, since some of you don’t know what’s going on, let’s review, shall we?”

I begin addressing everyone gathered in front of me.

We’re in a wide-open area about a thirty-minute walk from the town closest to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

I took in all the people who were in the elf village and sent them flying here with the spaceship I requisitioned from the elves.

The people present are members of the demon army and reincarnations.

Obviously, I didn’t save a seat for the survivors of the imperial army.

I need to get these people to hear me out so the demon army and reincarnations can choose what to do next.

But that’s got nothing to do with the imperial army.

I sent them straight to the nearest city.

“First of all, to set the stage, this world is on the brink of destruction. You can thank Potimas and the idiotic humans who went along with his plans for that. And, as you may have guessed from my use of the present tense, we haven’t gotten the world out of danger just yet.”

That’s the major premise of this whole thing.

Potimas popularized the use of MA energy.

It was like a dream come true: an all-purpose energy with the power to make humanity evolve.

But they should never have tampered with it. In truth, MA energy was really the life force of the planet itself, and the more people used it, the closer the planet came to death.

“Now, right before the planet finally fell apart, Güliedistodiez—who was only one small god at the time—made a deal with the

much more powerful god D and got the life support known as the system put into place. You can see the details regarding how the system works if you look at your Taboo skill."

The system takes the growth, skills, and stats that people gain by fighting, collects them all when that person dies, and puts them toward the revitalization of the planet.

Which means the inhabitants of this planet have to fight.

That's also why they were split into humankind and demonkind and made to perpetutate an endless war.

Demons are really humans who evolved with the influence of MA energy.

Although the demon race is declining, they can't stop fighting, because they have to atone for using up so much MA energy.

And it wasn't the fault of their ancestors, either. They have the very same souls that have continued to be reborn over and over.

Though they lose their memories each time they're reborn, the souls are still trapped in this world, forbidden to return to the regular cycle of death and rebirth until the planet's reconstruction is complete.

That punishment applies not only to demons, but to every living thing in this world.

"It's been many long years since the system was created. But we haven't been able to completely rebuild the planet."

We couldn't do it. We still can't!

At this point, it's no longer possible to complete the process without sacrifices.

"Lady Sariel, who serves as the core of the system, is reaching her limit, and soon she'll disappear completely. On top of that, the human souls that have been reborn again and again are wearing thin. As time passes, there will probably be fewer and fewer souls that even can be reborn."

This world doesn't have much time left.

"So now everyone has to make a choice. Who dies? A god? Or all of humanity?"

That's where the world quest comes in.

"Personally, we decided the humans should die. To save Lady Sariel, even if we have to sacrifice more than half the population of the planet to do it."

A significant shudder runs through the audience at that.

Can't say I blame them.

We're trying to save a single individual by obliterating over half the population.

Based on numbers alone, you couldn't possibly claim that's a fair exchange.

There's a saying that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. By that logic, any politician would surely prioritize the many over the few.

My choice is the opposite of that. It doesn't seem like the right one, does it?

But I've been aware of that from the start.

I decided long ago to cast aside all concept of right and wrong in order to fulfill my selfish desires.

"Of course, I never expected humanity to accept our choice. That's why we made our moves behind the scenes. All that was left was to destroy the system before anyone figured it out… But apparently D didn't like that idea."

I shrug.

Nobody would roll over and die just because you told them to.

I know I certainly wouldn't, and someone like White would fight back tooth and nail.

No one wants to die. That's a totally normal part of being alive.

Potimas's determination may have been on an extreme end of the spectrum, but even ordinary people don't *want* to die.

No normal person would offer up their life for someone else's sake.

Anyone who would definitely couldn't be considered normal.

So I knew perfectly well that no one would approve of our actions.

Taboo hadn't been installed in everyone's minds like it is now, so even if I had shouted the unpleasant truth about humanity at the top of my lungs and declared that I was doing this to save Lady Sariel, the people would only believe what they want to believe.

No doubt there would've been a chorus of "That can't be true!" "Don't be ridiculous!" thrown back in my face.

Just as no one wants to die, no one wants to admit to sins they don't know they've committed.

After all, our claim is basically "You people must die to atone for the terrible sins committed in your past lives."

That would never fly with people who couldn't even remember those past lives.

In a way, you could say that installing the Taboo knowledge in everyone's minds and making them remember all that was a positive for us.

Not that I'm grateful to D for that, since it had the much bigger downside of telling everyone about the consequences of destroying the system, which we were trying to keep secret…

Based on what I've gathered from White and Gülie, D intervened for the sole purpose of keeping things interesting, but that just made things needlessly complicated for me.

I mean, if D hadn't gotten involved, we definitely would've won by now.

If we could have just kept the consequences of destroying the system under wraps, Gülie and Dustin wouldn't have tried to stop us, and we could have achieved our goal.

But nooooo, that would've been way too boring for dear old D.

Instead, we're now caught up in something we have no way of predicting the outcome to.

Not to mention, the rules put us at one hell of a disadvantage.

But let's ignore the rules for now.

Right now, what I need to explain most urgently is what we're trying to do.

"First things first, our goal is the absolute destruction of the system. The idea is to use the energy that runs this massive conjuring known as the system to rebuild the planet instead. The big upside is that the planet would be restored, and Lady Sariel would be set free when the system she's trapped inside is destroyed."

It's a win-win. The planet would be restored, and Lady Sariel would be set free…

…Unfortunately, Lady Sariel is already past the point of saving.

Even if we freed her now, we couldn't keep her alive.

At best, we could avoid her total destruction by sending her soul back into the cycle of death and rebirth, and entrusting the rest to the next generation.

But there's probably no need to mention that part.

"The downside, as you already well know, is that about half the population would die. The destruction of the system would mean that the accompanying skills and stats, and the energy that creates those, would be taken away by force. Anyone who can't handle the impact of that, or whatever you want to call it, would die on the

spot. Also, the impact in question would be bigger, based on how many skills a person had, or how high their stats were."

The worst-case scenario would be that the soul gets destroyed and can never return to the cycle of death and rebirth, but I'll leave that part out, too.

While there's a big difference between regular death and the destruction of the soul, I don't think they'd get it, even if I explain it to them. Honestly, even I don't fully understand it.

Either way, it means the end of one's current life. I doubt the rest makes much of a difference to anyone who's alive.

But that's also why I'm not going into detail about Lady Sariel, either.

Nobody's going to agree to letting half of humanity die to save someone who we already know is going to die anyway.

"The other downside is the disappearance of the system itself. That means skills and stats will all disappear. Many things that the existence of the system made convenient won't be possible anymore. Since skills and stats are such a big part of everyday life, it's pretty easy to imagine that the system's disappearance would immediately present some major challenges."

Skills and stats are really just methods of obtaining energy for restoring the world.

But over the years, they've become integral to the human experience.

Stats are useful for physical labor, speedy delivery, and so on.

And there are more skills than you can count at this point, being used in all kinds of ways.

If they disappear, the people who depend on them will be in trouble for sure.

But wait, there's more…

"It's not just humans who will lose their skills and stats. Monsters will, too. And I suspect monsters are even more dependent on their skills than humans."

Humans aren't born with skills; they acquire them as needed. So while they'd be inconvenienced if they lose their skills, they probably wouldn't die.

But monsters are born with skills that they need to survive.

Like the Swimming skill for monsters that live underwater, or the Fire Resistance skill for monsters that live in hot climates.

I can only imagine what'll happen if they lose those…

Maybe their survival instincts and natural adaptability would kick in, or something.

But if we're being realistic, a lot of them would die.

And that doesn't just apply to monsters whose skills help them adapt to the environment. A lot of monsters would also become significantly weaker if they lost their stats and skills.

Then the ecosystems would be thrown way out of balance.

Prey animals might be driven to extinction, harmless monsters might turn savage… Any number of things could go wrong.

"So yeah, it'd be total chaos, more or less. Half the population will die when we destroy the system. And the other half will die off in the chaos that ensues. That's my estimation. For human losses, that is."

In the worst case, I think it could be even higher than that, but I'm hoping the surviving humans can work together to prevent that sort of outcome.

That might be irresponsible of me to hope for. But I don't have the strength to live much longer while still being useful.

As selfish as it is, I don't really care what happens to the world once we achieve our goal.

All that matters is the end result.

"On the other hand, if you don't choose our approach… If you choose to side with Dustin and the Word of God…these sacrifices won't happen. Life will continue as it is now…at least, I think so."

I corrected myself at the last minute.

Because I have no idea what Dustin and his people are planning to do from here on.

"To be honest with you, I don't know what Dustin and the others are thinking. But based on what was said during the world quest, I'm guessing he's got something up his sleeve."

Otherwise, they wouldn't be opposing us like this and offering the options of saving people or saving a god.

There's no proof that the depleted souls of humanity would be saved if they just keep up the status quo and go on saving energy.

So the implication that abandoning the goddess will somehow save humanity probably means that they've got some kind of plan, too.

"I don't know what that plan might be. So I can't tell you the positives and negatives from their perspective. For all I know, they might even have some groundbreaking plan that would get the

world out of this mess with far fewer sacrifices than our plan. But since we were given the choice of either saving a god or saving all people, it's safe to assume that their plan doesn't favor Lady Sariel. So there's no point."

Lady Sariel is my top priority.

"I will save Lady Sariel, no matter the cost. That's what I've been striving for all this time. So I have no intention of changing course now."

I'm going to see this through, even if I have to sacrifice more than half of humanity to do it.

"Now, that should be enough for you to understand our position. Next we'll go over the rules again, and discuss the conditions for our victory."

I think my explanation has made my stance clear to the audience.

"Firstly, as I've been saying this whole time, our goal is to destroy the system. Let's assume their goal is to stop us."

It's possible there's more to the other side's goal than just that, but there's no point in worrying about it when we have no way of knowing.

All we can do is aim to achieve our goals.

"And as it happens, the destruction of the system is already underway."

The audience murmurs in surprise at that.

I wave a hand to calm them down and continue.

"That doesn't mean it's going to be destroyed any minute now, though. A job that big can't be accomplished in such a short span of time. For reference, it's sort of like demolishing a huge building, you know?"

It takes time to properly destroy a structure that big.

We've had to slowly dismantle the giant conjuring known as the system while saving up energy to put into restoring the planet.

It's not the kind of thing you can just blow up with a controlled explosion. It takes time.

"Naturally, the other side is going to try and stop us. So we need to focus on defense until the system's destruction is complete."

Basically, we're on defense, and they're on offense.

"In fact, they're already in the process of trying…"

White and Gülie's battle is already underway, for one thing.

I'm sure Dustin is already hard at work behind the scenes, too.

“Like they announced in the world quest, the god of black and the god of white have already begun their battle. By the way, the god of white is on our side. Oh, and even though it’s begun, it’s not gonna end right away any more than the destruction of the system. So don’t freak out.”

A battle between gods is one of attrition.

It’ll take a pretty long time before a winner is decided.

Especially in the case of White and Gülie.

White has got ridiculous survival abilities, yet her attacks are on the weak side for a god.

She’s the type to stubbornly stay alive and slowly chip away at her opponent.

I don’t know what Gülie’s power is like exactly, but I just know White won’t go down without a fight.

First of all, she’s so tough that I had to give up on destroying her even *before* she became a god.

“They’re probably fighting in an alternate dimension, so we can’t interfere with their battle directly.”

Not that any of us could probably do much to affect a battle between gods anyway.

They’re on another level entirely.

“But the world quest has given us a means of indirectly affecting the battle.”

Namely, by praying.

You can pray to one of the gods and send power to them.

I imagine the power from each individual prayer is quite small.

But if it comes from every living person in this world, it’ll add up to a lot.

Every vote counts, or something like that.

As a result, even the most powerless people now have a means of affecting the outcome in a way that matters.

In other words, all of mankind can participate in this fight.

“To put it bluntly, the outcome of this battle is now directly linked to which side emerges victorious.”

Both White and Gülie are too far apart from anyone else in terms of power.

They’re each strong enough to wipe out the other’s army of followers all on their own.

At my strongest, I might’ve been able to at least put up a decent fight against Gülie… Not so much in my current state, though.

On top of that, White is the one in charge of destroying the system.

If we lose her, we won't be able to accomplish that anymore.

So basically, whether White wins or loses also decides whether *we* win or lose.

"Which means our side just has to pray for White's victory. In more ways than one."

Despite my best efforts at humor, nobody cracks a smile.

…I bombed that one.

"So, anyway, you might think that means there's nothing else we can do, but you'd be wrong."

I keep talking as if I didn't just totally bomb.

They're all still listening with serious expressions, which must mean most of them didn't even notice!

"If White loses, it's over for us. But even if she wins, they still have ways of keeping the system from being destroyed. Unfair, isn't it? So we've got to put a stop to that."

At a glance, the rules make it seem like this is a fair fight, since anyone can participate.

But in reality, we're actually at a pretty big disadvantage.

One reason is the conditions for victory.

If White goes down, we officially lose, yet if Gülie is the one who loses, their side will still have another chance at victory.

"Their play is interfering with the system directly. People with the special Seven Deadly Sins or Seven Heavenly Virtues skills have something called ruling class privileges, and only those who have gone through a process called establishing ruler authority have the ability to access the system. By doing so, they can prevent the system's destruction."

The conditions for this are really quite strict.

First, you have to have a rare Seven Deadly Sins or Seven Heavenly Virtues skill.

On top of that, you have to apply to have your ruler authority established, and get that request granted.

Possessing the skill alone isn't enough.

Incidentally, the method of applying is written in Taboo.

In other words, you need to have a Seven Deadly Sins or a Seven Heavenly Virtues skill, and max out Taboo on top of that in order to have any way of getting ruler authority.

Although I guess someone else with maxed-out Taboo could

teach you how to do it.

White used this loophole to make Natsume get ruler authority.

But at any rate, that means there are fourteen people at the most who have access to ruler authority—a difficult hurdle for sure.

That's true even now that all of humanity has Taboo installed.

Except in a way, the numbers don't even matter, since one of the few people with that authority happens to be the Word of God pontiff, Dustin: the leader of the opposing side.

All Dustin has to do is stop the system's destruction himself.

"That being said, just having ruler authority doesn't mean you can stop the destruction of the system whenever you want. You have to go to a specific place where you can interface with the system directly. And that place happens to be in the deepest part of the Great Elroe Labyrinth."

Deep at the bottom of the Great Elroe Labyrinth is the door to the system's core, where Lady Sariel is sealed away.

The entire labyrinth is really a path to that place, and at the same time, a fortress that protects it.

"In other words, our job is to prevent anyone from their side with ruler authority from approaching that place."

Dustin is definitely going to come here.

In which case our role is defending the labyrinth to prevent Dustin from getting to its heart.

White's victory.

And the defense of the Great Elroe Labyrinth's core.

It's only when we achieve both those goals that we can claim victory.

To put it another way, their side only needs to prevent one of those two things to win.

In that way, these rules obviously put us at a disadvantage.

But the biggest disadvantage to our side is probably the ability for everyone to interfere in White and Gülie's battle through prayer.

Nobody wants to die. Of course, more people are bound to pray for Gülie.

The rules are fair in that they allow anyone a chance to decide the future, but unfair to us in that they put our side at a considerable disadvantage.

Even so, we're the ones who are going to win.

"Now that you've heard all this, it's up to you to decide."

A murmur of surprise runs through the crowd.

No doubt they were expecting me to tell them to side with us.

But I don't trust anyone except me and mine.

I'm not going to ask someone to have my back when I suspect they might stab it.

"We'll defend the Great Elroe Labyrinth ourselves. From this point on, anyone who sets foot in the labyrinth will be considered an enemy and taken down on sight, no matter who it might be. So if you want to side with us, I'll ask you to do it from outside the labyrinth."

I can't let anyone who may or may not be an ally get close to the finish line.

"We're heading to the Great Elroe Labyrinth now. To be perfectly honest, we'll have our hands full too much to offer you guys any more help. So you'll have to decide what to do for yourselves, and take independent action accordingly. I won't blame any of you for whatever happens, even if you turn against us. No matter which side wins, I intend to accept that as the will of the world."

At this point, we've got bigger fish to fry than pointing fingers.

It's not like either side is right or wrong.

We just want to protect different things, that's all.

No hard feelings, if you ask me.

"That's it. I wish all of you good luck."

With those words, I ended my speech.

White 1

“Well, there you have it. Good luck.”

…What?

There I have *what*, exactly?!

You can’t just tell me that in the middle of a battle and expect my mind to *not* go blank!

Here I am, in the middle of an ultimate showdown with Black, and D suddenly starts blabbing at me telepathically!

Yeah, I heard the details about the world quest.

I didn’t hear the very first notification, but the ones after Black and I started fighting came through to me.

So I’ve got a handle on the rules to this world quest thing.

I’m sure Black does, too.

He seems to have heard the Demon Lord’s and the pontiff’s speeches as well.

Generally, that sort of notification uses the system to broadcast to the entire world. It’s actually kind of weird that I could hear it, too, since my connection to the system is cut off.

Then again, D is the one who sent out the notification, so, y’know…

I’m sure making it so I could hear the announcement too was child’s play.

Although that also means she must have meddled with me so that I could hear it…

While she didn’t attack me or anything, the fact she was able to easily slip past my defenses and awareness and all that certainly is a painful reminder of how much more powerful she is than I…

Ugh, but enough about D for now. No point in dwelling on it.

At any rate, the long and short of it is that both Black and I were able to hear the Demon Lord’s and the pontiff’s respective

speeches.

Which definitely put both of us in a “we gotta do this, let’s go!” mood.

And then, just as we’re both raring to go—a sudden communication from D totally takes the wind out of my sails!

No waaay.

She must have timed it like that on purpose, right?!

Between the world quest and this little extra comment, she sure is interfering a lot for someone who claims to be a passive observer.

Just keep your nose out of it already…

In the midst of all this madness, Black has stopped moving, too.

It’s the perfect chance to attack, except I’m at my wit’s end myself… Let’s just call a temporary cease-fire for now.

“Then again, I suppose that might be difficult to accept right away. I’ll answer any questions you might have.”

D offers a tiny ounce of kindness, probably due to the fact that Black and I have both frozen in place.

I wish she would’ve expressed that kindness by not complicating this whole mess instead.

“You said you distributed Taboo to all of humanity, did you not?”

“I did.”

Ah, Black’s got his face in his palm now.

Can’t say I blame the guy.

Taboo had some pretty upsetting information, even for an outsider like me. Does that mean the rest of the world was a screaming hellscape when it hit?

No, forget the past tense—it might still be a hellscape even now.

“Taboo is technically a skill, though. Where exactly did that energy come from?”

Oh, hey! That’s a good point!

Taboo is a skill of sorts, which means it includes the corresponding amount of energy.

So it must have taken a huge amount of energy to distribute that to all of mankind.

That would be using up way too much of what little this planet has left!

“Not to worry. I provided that out of my own pocket.”

Phew. That’s a relief.

…Relief?

Out of D's pocket?

You're telling me D, of all people, put up some of her own energy for this world's sake?

"Although I will say the energy I provided originally belonged to this world anyway."

D drops a bombshell that lays waste to my doubts.

Energy that used to belong to this world?

And where did *that* come from exactly?

"It's from the explosion that created the reincarnations in the first place."

…Okay, is she secretly still reading my mind or what?

According to D, she stopped being able to read my thoughts when I became a god, but I dunno…

Well, whatever.

The explanation about this energy is more important right now.

The explosion that created the reincarnations must be the one that happened in the classroom on Earth.

The one that was apparently caused by the previous hero and Demon Lord.

That little number drained a bunch of this world's energy, and the students who got caught in the blast were reincarnated into this world.

But that attack was intended to kill D, or specifically an administrator.

Wouldn't the energy have all been expended in the process of the attack?

"Don't you think that an attack intended to kill an administrator—a god, really—ought to have the power to destroy more than just a single classroom?"

…Well, when you put it *that* way.

The attack was indeed meant to kill a god.

Now that I think about it, it's odd that it only had enough juice to blow up one classroom.

An attack like that wouldn't even kill an Araba-class dragon, never mind a god.

And yet it drained a massive amount of this world's saved-up energy.

The power of the attack and the amount of energy it consumed don't add up.

“In other words, I collected the surplus energy and kept it stored away for safekeeping.”

Ah, Black staggered a little.

Can’t blame him for getting a little dizzy, either.

The attack on D was perpetrated by the second-to-last hero and the last Demon Lord before the current ones.

It was originally intended to target Black, except the goddess Sariel forcibly redirected it to D, which led to fun consequences like the reincarnations being born into this world and a massive amount of energy being lost.

And Black has always felt really guilty about how things went down.

So it’s no surprise that he would be distressed to learn that D had secretly pocketed all that energy.

Still, this is actually great news.

It means that some of the lost energy, though I’m sure not all of it, has been restored to this world.

…If you overlook the fact that it was used for Taboo, anyway.

Just then, Black jerks upright, as if he’s just realized something.

“Wait! You said all of humanity?! So if the system was destroyed in the present conditions, what would happen to them?! Taboo is a skill, too, isn’t it?!”

Oh yeah. That’s another good point.

Taboo is a skill all right.

The moment the system is destroyed, all skills will be torn away not just from humanity, but from all living things.

Our estimate is that approximately half of humanity will die of the shock.

Some of them won’t just die, either. Their souls will probably be destroyed.

And the more skills you have, the higher your chances of dying.

Since Taboo is a skill, too, tacking that on to all of humanity must mean…

“Even more humans will die as a result, I’m sure.”

Yep, there it is!

Ah, Black fell to his knees.

Um…yeah, well, y’know. Hang in there, buddy.

“No need to be alarmed. All you have to do is to win and prevent the system from being destroyed, and none of that will matter.”

Wait a sec.

That would mean I lose, though.

You're just gonna give Black even more motivation!

"Oh, and that reminds me. Even if you do win, I won't come for revenge or anything, don't worry."

Black's head whips up at that.

"But you said that you would never allow any harm done to your kin."

"Well, I know I said I was going to make her my kin, but we haven't officially made any such contract yet. Which means that while I've made an unofficial offer, she isn't technically my kin yet."

Uh…right.

Yeah, makes sense.

There's not really any connection between me and D just yet.

"If she falls here, then so it goes. It simply means that she was not worthy to become my kin, that's all."

HEY!

…No, listen, okay?

It's not like I *wanted* to be D's kin or anything, y'know? Definitely not, okay? It's just, when you put it that way, y'know? I can't help but get a little mad, okay?

Heh. Heh-heh.

Now you've gone and said it.

Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha…

In the end, I just can't afford to lose.

Now both of us have even more reasons that we have to win.

I face off against Black again.

"Now I have nothing more to fear. This is not personal, you understand. In fact, I am more grateful to you than anything. And yet, even so, I must defeat you."

While Black declares his renewed determination, I simply beckon him in silence.

"Let us begin!"

And so, our battle resumes.

"Be sure to entertain me."

…With an evil god spectating on the sidelines.

What a pain!

Two shadows leap and bound between tall, futuristic buildings.

One is Black.

The other is me.

My lower half is in spiderlike arachne form, hopping effortlessly from one building to the next.

Arachne form increases my jumping ability, of course, and I can use the eight legs to run up buildings and such, making it ideally suited to this kind of movement.

And if I use my threads on top of that, I can even do tricky maneuvers like changing directions in midair and easily crossing greater distances.

Bweh-heh-heh.

Bet you regret not making our battlefield an empty plain or something!

You're kidding yourself if you think you can outmatch a spider in an area with tons of obstacles!

While I'm cackling inwardly, I suddenly sense something closing in on me at an alarming speed.

Whaaat? You can really match *my* speed?

As I turn around in surprise, I see a car flying toward me.

A caaaar?!

I dodge it in a panic.

Whew. That caught me off guard.

I wasn't expecting a car, of all things…good thing I dodged it on instinct.

This really is a parallel world, huh?

It's got flying cars and everything.

While I'm thinking such stupid thoughts, things suddenly get darker all around me.

What the—?! I look up and see the sun nearly blocked out by a building flying right at me.

A buildiiiing?!

I make myself scarce, in an even bigger panic, and the building crashes down directly behind me.

There's a tremor in the ground and a loud crash, followed by a cloud of dust.

Um, excuse me.

Don't you think this is a little too grandiose?

A car is one thing, but flying buildings?

That's a parallel world for you.

It totally turns everything I thought I knew upside down.

But y'know, just because this is a parallel world, doesn't mean you have to go *that* far.

Isn't this a little much?

My face twitches a little as I stare upward.

Now there's a whole bunch of buildings floating in the air.

The same set of buildings I was hopping all over just moments ago.

Well, that's weird. Why would those be floating in midair? Golly, what a mystery.

…Yeah, there's no time to react like that!

I start zooming away as fast as I can, at the same moment that the floating buildings start flying toward me.

Each one has an insane amount of mass, and now they're speeding toward me like bullets.

GAAAAAAH!

Hang in there, leg muscles!

Not that I know whether spider legs actually use muscles to move or not!

Just move as fast as you can, feet!

We've gotta get away from these things!

There are intermittent booming sounds from behind me, shaking the ground beneath my feet each time.

Normal buildings would be one thing, but this is a world Black created.

I can't assume that buildings here are ordinary.

Even I would probably take a lot of damage if I got hit by one of those.

…I mean, not that I wouldn't take damage f rom an ordinary building, you know?

Seriously, though! What kind of crazy person does something like using *buildings* as bullets?!

Hmm? Who am I to talk when I used meteors as bullets, you say?

Look, I don't see what that has to do with it.

Besides, this is Black's dimension, all right?

And yet here he is pulling up buildings and throwing them around, causing all kinds of environmental destruction—or rather, dimensional destruction. It's like messing up your home with your own two hands.

I dunno how he can stand it.

I could never do something like that.

Now, maybe it's because I'm distracted by emotions I don't really understand, like pathos and admiration, or maybe it's because I'm too focused on running away. Either way, I'm a second too late to react when the space in front of me warps abruptly.

Black leaps out from the tear in space.

Tch! He got the jump on me?!

Normally, teleporting would be a bad move.

In a battle between spatial conjuring masters, teleportation takes too much time.

Admittedly, for me, activating teleportation probably takes less than a second.

But that's still too long.

It leaves space for your opponent to interfere.

The teleportation rune is complicated enough to begin with. Mess with it a little, and it falls apart.

Then your teleportation fails.

If you were just moving an object, that wouldn't be such a big deal. If you're teleporting yourself, on the other hand, then the risk is a whole lot higher.

Worst case scenario, you might even get sucked into a gap between dimensions and be gone forever, or something equally terrifying.

Of course, I have certain safeties in place to keep things from going *too* horribly wrong. But depending on what the other person does to mess with my spell, there's no guarantee disaster wouldn't still happen.

Which is why teleporting would usually be a bad move in a battle between gods…unless you use *giant buildings* as a distraction to get the jump on the other person.

I mean, yeah, a bullet hell with entire buildings as the bullets is definitely enough of a decoy—way *too* much, if you ask me!

Black's hand is gripping a sword as it closes in.

I'm in big trouble if that thing hits me.

I dodge to the side with almost unnecessary vigor, avoiding the sword slash.

"You won't escape!"

But another building comes careening down at me right away.

Oh, come on! Buildings aren't supposed to rain out of the sky!

What's happening here, a natural disaster?! So this is the power of a god?!

I gnash my teeth in frustration at the sight you would normally only find in an overblown battle manga, and use my threads to catch the building.

And yes, even I have to admit that a spiderweb strong enough to catch a falling building is pretty overpowered, too.

But I'm not just gonna catch it!

I'll send it right down toward Black's head!

Take this! Building Dodge-and-Drop!

Speak softly and carry a big building, like they say!

Enjoy getting crushed by your own stupid building attack!

SLAAAASH! The building gets sliced neatly in two.

…Right. Yeah.

No, I knew an attack like that wouldn't be enough to take down Black, okay?

It's just, watching someone cut a building in half is kinda, y'know…

Can't you leave that stuff in the realm of battle manga?

But complaining in my inner monologue isn't going to make Black stop, of course. His sword comes thrusting toward me.

I jump back with another exaggerated dodge, escaping the sword's range.

That sword is bad news.

I can sense some crazy energy coming off it.

If it cuts me, I'm guessing it'll damage the energy within me, not just my body.

A battle between gods is mainly an energy-based war of attrition.

Whoever can waste more of the other's energy is the victor.

Getting hit with enough force to cut a building in two wouldn't be a big deal in itself, since I could just heal the physical damage.

But the amount of energy in that blade is more destructive than just that.

Most likely, it's not just physical destruction. It can probably erode my energy, too.

I'm already at a disadvantage here. I can't afford that kind of hit.

…Still, that's got to require a lot of energy for Black to use it, too. Yet he's busting it out without hesitation.

Attacking requires energy, too.

If you use too much energy on attacks, that alone could run you out of gas if you're not careful.

So I always figured you were only supposed to use lots of energy on an attack at a critical moment when you know it's really gonna count.

But here's Black throwing energy around like it grows on trees.

That sword probably uses the most, but floating buildings and even just maintaining this dimensional space have gotta cost a fair amount of energy, too.

So why does it almost seem like he's actually gaining energy, not losing it?

…No, it's not just my imagination. His energy is growing.

Damn it aaaall! This must be the effects of those stupid prayers!

The rule is that people can pray for one god or the other, and give them just a little bit of power.

That's gotta be why it seems like Black's energy has been increasing for a while now.

Just as I suspected when I first heard the rules, Black's definitely getting more prayer power.

Oof. My lack of popularity is painfully clear…

B-but that doesn't bother me at all!

I'm a natural-born loner, baby!

I don't need approval from the masses to win this whole damn thing!

Or at least, that's what I'm telling myself…but this is looking pretty grim, isn't it?

We're fighting in a dimension of Black's creation.

This futuristic city, not quite like anything on Earth, is probably based on what this planet looked like before the system was made.

It might even be the city where Black and Ariel met.

…Though if that's the case, it'd be kinda tasteless to chuck buildings at me from such a precious place, don't you think?

Well, either way, we're on Black's turf.

He created it, so he has the advantage here.

It was a mistake to let him drag me into his home field when the battle first started, or at least a miscalculation.

Except really, it's all D's fault for announcing that stupid world quest from out of nowhere!

I bet the reason I didn't hear that first announcement initially

was to delay my reaction, too!

That's the only explanation I can think of for why I was able to hear the rest of the announcements, but not the very first one.

Damn that evil god! Always finding ways to put me at a disadvantage!

Now he's got a serious head start on me.

I glance around.

Countless white spiders are still eating away at the space, trying to consume the city itself.

It's like this three-dimensional space is in a two-dimensional picture spotted with holes.

As odd as it looks, the spider-eaten sections make up less than 10 percent of the whole scene.

It's basically a power map of mine against Black's.

I've got less than 10 percent, and the other 90-plus percent is all his.

Should I say my side has got nearly 10 percent, or not even 10 percent yet?

Either way, as long as Black's field has the advantage, I can't go on the offensive.

I can't afford to attack.

I've gotta stay on the defensive and hold out, or I'll drain all my energy and go down without ever getting in a proper counterattack.

Right now, I just need to endure his attacks, keep eroding away at his field, and overwrite it with my own field.

Once the power distribution on the map reaches fifty-fifty, then I should finally be able to fight back.

But as hard as my little clones are working to spread my influence over the field, the results aren't much to write home about.

That's mostly because the resistance against them has gotten even stronger since Black started getting more energy from the outside.

It's not enough to push them back entirely, but it's certainly slowing their progress almost to a halt.

At this rate, I've gotta be ready for this to take a very, very long time.

I have to withstand Black's barrage of attacks until the balance of the field evens out.

Ughhh, this suuucks…

But it's not like Black has it easy, either.

Since I'm still managing to encroach on his field, that means my spatial conjuring is stronger.

He's got control over the battlefield for now, but if the power distribution map shifts in my favor, I'll be the one with the big advantage.

Then he'd be forced to go on the defensive instead, while I'd swap onto offense.

And since my spatial conjuring is superior, Black will have no way of getting the advantage back if I manage to pull off the switch.

He knows that, too, which is why he's pulling out all the stops to try to pull off a win before I can overwrite the field in my favor.

Otherwise, I can't imagine why he would use such an obviously energy-sucking weapon like that sword, even if he is getting extra energy from the outside.

I bet that thing uses up energy as fast as he can receive it.

Except it still looks like his energy is increasing slightly…which means he must be getting a whole hell of a lot at once.

Still, there has to be a limit to how much energy he can receive.

Since it's limited to the total population of mankind, that means there's a ceiling on the amount of energy they can provide, too.

Hopefully, the amount of energy he's receiving will decrease over time.

In that respect, the longer things drag on, the more Black is at a disadvantage.

Time is on my side.

With each minute that passes, the situation will slowly turn in my favor.

Of course, that's only if I can keep fighting in tip-top shape the whole time, though.

I mean, think about it.

As impressive as my endurance might be, if I get injured, obviously I won't be able to fight at full strength anymore.

In the case of a battle between gods, physical wounds can be healed instantly. It's the energy you lose that can't be recovered.

Even if I appear completely unharmed, I won't be able to pull off a comeback if I start running low on energy.

One major hit could drain tons of my energy, and then I'd be in big trouble.

I don't think a single slash from that sword would be a fatal

wound…at least, I sure hope not.

But just 'cause it won't kill me doesn't mean it'd be no big deal.

I don't know how much energy I'd lose if that sword hits me; ergo, it's better not to let it touch me at all.

One hit might even drain enough of my energy to make a turnaround totally impossible.

So I really wanna avoid all of Black's attacks until I can overwrite the field.

On the flip side, he wants to damage me before that happens and nip my attempted comeback in the bud.

Can I withstand the onslaught, or will Black manage to land enough hits to stop me?

That's about the shape of things right now.

I've got a long haul ahead of me if I want to win, and if I get distracted for even a second, I could lose the whole damn thing.

So Black has the home field advantage, and I can't even afford to take a single hit—how is that fair, huh?!

No waaay.

How come he gets the upper hand, yet I'm the one starting with a major handicap?

Seriously, no waaay…

I dodge Black's sword as it swoops toward me.

Then his mouth opens, and a breath attack blasts out.

Don't use Dragon Breath while you're in human form!

I mean, I know he can do stuff like that 'cause he's really a dragon, but still!

And sure, I could do it, too, if I wanted to, but come on!

Using a breath attack in human form just plain looks weird, okay?!

Although it's certainly effective at catching me by surprise!

And yes, it did hit me, if you must know!

My human upper half gets blown to smithereens just like that.

But I've still got my spider lower half, and I can grow back the human half easily.

Yeah, I'll have to spend some energy to do so, but it's a tiny amount in the grand scheme of things.

In terms of damage, 'tis but a scratch.

Well…a scratch that destroyed my whole upper body.

The way visible damage doesn't equate to actual damage is one of the annoying, or at least confusing, parts about a fight between

gods.

It makes it hard to tell who's got the upper hand at a glance.

Take that last attack, for example—we probably both used about the same amount of energy, even though my body is the one that got wrecked by that breath attack.

While I used energy to restore my destroyed upper body, Black used energy to attack in the first place.

In a battle of gods, whoever uses up their energy first loses.

It takes energy both to attack and to defend, so the person who's on the offensive isn't necessarily the one who's winning.

Either way, you've got to carefully calculate how much energy each move is going to take.

In my case, it didn't make a huge difference whether I took a hit from that breath attack or not. So rather than dodging it in a panic, I chose to let the attack hit so I could stay on my toes in case he followed up with an attack from that sword.

And sure enough, here it comes!

I evade Black's sword slash easily.

Black must have known as well as I did that his breath attack wouldn't damage me, which clearly meant that he was really after making an opening to attack with his sword, duh!

Ah-ha-ha-haaa!

You'll have to try harder than that obvious strategy to pull one over on me!

See, I've figured something out in our battle so far.

Black isn't used to fighting!

Sure, he *is* strong, there's no arguing that.

His movements are very precise, not unpolished in the least.

But if I had to describe it, I'd say it seems like he's done a lot of training but not much actual combat.

His fighting style is, I dunno…very clean.

It lacks that rough-and-tumble "I'm-gonna-take-you-down-no-matter-what!" quality.

When you think about it, it makes sense: Black's been the unrivaled manager of this world for a long time, which means combat is only a distant memory… In fact, did he ever even have a life-or-death battle before the system was created?

Meanwhile, I've been fighting to survive from the second I was born. It's only natural that there'd be a stark difference in our levels of real-world combat experience.

Thanks to that, I've managed to make it without taking a single serious hit so far.

That doesn't mean it's been easy, though—this situation still totally sucks, obviously!

Black is a super-high-spec fighter, even if he isn't really used to actually fighting!

His swordsmanship is very by-the-book, and he's not very good at feints.

So it's relatively easy to tell what he's going to do next, but let me tell you, predicting attacks and actually dodging them are two very different things!

This time, it's another artless overhead swing.

Except for the fact that it's unbelievably fast.

Only after I dodge the attack does the *whoosh*ing sound reach my ears.

If it left a sound behind, that means it must've been easily moving faster than the speed of sound, huh…?

His attacks are faster than the eye can follow.

That makes it really hard to dodge, even if he's easy to read in theory.

If I let my guard down for even a second, I'll be sliced in two before you can blink.

Dammit!

If only I had my go-to weapon on hand, at the very least…!

I'm pretty sure my giant scythe could hold up to Black's sword.

It kinda seems to have a mind of its own despite the fact that I created it, and it's got high enough specs to qualify as a legendary-class weapon, I'd say.

If we went blade-to-blade, I don't think it would go down that easily.

In fact, if I attacked him with that scythe, I bet I could deal Black some real damage.

And it even has its own energy stores separate from mine.

An external battery pack?

Come on, having that scythe would open up tons of strategic options!

So why don't I have it, you ask? Because Black is blocking me from summoning the scythe for all he's worth.

I'm certainly trying my best to get it into my hands, and it seems like the scythe is even trying to teleport here itself, too.

Buuut, Black is apparently very wary of that scythe and the huge amount of energy it clearly holds, and is doing everything in his power to prevent me from summoning it.

Like I said before, interfering with teleportation is easy.

So there's not much else I can do.

If my opponent was trying to summon an obviously dangerous weapon like that, you can bet I'd be stopping them, too.

Now, if I'd been able to go into this battle fully prepared, of course I would've had my scythe, and this would all be waaay easier…

Dammit, it's all D's fault!

I know I've been complaining about her a lot, but that's her fault, too!

If I come out of this alive, I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind, I swear!

Otherwise it wouldn't even be worth it.

That's only *if* I survive, though.

For now, I better focus on my present predicament.

If I can buy enough time and survive Black's onslaught of attacks, I win.

If I go down before then, Black wins.

Honestly, I'm so busy trying to stay alive that I can't worry about anything else.

So I'm just gonna have to let the Demon Lord and the others handle it.

Which does worry me, of course.

On the rare occasions I've ever entrusted things to others, I always keep an eye on them via my clones so that I can intervene if I need to.

But this time, I can't even do that much.

Which means I'm fully counting on them, and I can't even try to help.

And of course it's at the most important stage of the game.

Yeah, I'm worried.

But since we've made it this far, I'm just gonna have to put my trust in the Demon Lord and the others.

The Demon Lord has handled all kinds of ordeals, and at this point, so have the likes of Vampy and Mr. Oni.

I've gotta have faith that they'll get through this one, too.

Besides, we're, like, uh…you know. F-fr-friends! Or whatever!

Aaaargh! God, trusting and depending on others is, like, sooo embarrassing!

What the hell?! Whose idea was this?!

I feel crazy awkward about it, but my thoughts on the matter don't change the fact that I just have to leave it to them, regardless.

It's not so much that I'm trusting them as that I have no other choice…

If anything happens to the Demon Lord or any of the others, I can't come running to help.

…Dammit, I'm worried!

The tide will turn in my favor if I buy enough time?

I don't have time to be so blasé about it.

Gotta give it all I've got and put an end to this battle ASAP!

Not that I haven't been giving it all I've got this whole time already!

That means I'll just have to surpass my limits!

Unleash your full power, me! Yeahhhh!

I make a move forward, and Black's sword grazes my face.

Yeahhhh…

Um, turns out randomly attacking is still a bad plan!

I can't lose my head just 'cause I'm worried about the Demon Lord and company.

This isn't the kind of opponent I can defeat in a panic, after all.

Play it cool, girl.

I'm already fighting to the best of my ability, so if I try to push myself past my limits, I'm just gonna end up making a mistake and leaving myself open to attack.

The shortest route to success is to keep calm and carry on.

As much as I'm worried about the others, I've gotta put them out of my mind for now.

The Demon Lord and all the rest will be fine.

That's all part of putting your trust in someone, I think.

And I bet the Demon Lord and the others are putting their trust in me, too.

So I've gotta make sure I don't let them down.

My opponent is Black, an administrator who's protected this world for ages.

Not to mention that he's got most of mankind backing him up.

I couldn't ask for a better foe!

Now I've just gotta win this thing, and live up to the trust of

my…those guys!

…Even if all I'm doing right now is running around dodging things!

My fervor thus renewed, I dodge Black's next sword slash with a magnificent backstep.

Shun 1

I told everyone present that I wanted to search for a solution where no one had to be sacrificed, instead of taking either side.

There are seven people here: Katia, Fei, Sue, Yuri, Elder Ronandt, Natsume, and me.

I'm well aware that it's absurd to try to change the fate of the world with only seven people.

But I also know that Julius wouldn't have given up even in this hopeless situation.

So I won't give up, either.

I may as well struggle until the very last, even if it's in vain.

My strength is probably less than what Wakaba and her people have in one pinky finger.

But since it can't do any harm, I'll give it a shot anyway.

I'd rather tackle things head-on and fall than give up without even trying.

"Yeah, sure, but what are you gonna *do* exactly?"

While I'm brimming with determination, Natsume shoots me a bored-sounding question.

The others all agreed with me, except for him, the only person who doesn't seem motivated to try.

He didn't refuse either, though, so I assumed it was a passive agreement.

Ever since he woke up after the battle in the elf village, Natsume has barely even shown any signs of life.

Maybe that's to be expected when you consider he just found out he'd been brainwashed and working as a pawn for Wakaba's side.

Of course, that doesn't mean I forgive him for what he did.

But it doesn't seem like he expects to be forgiven, either. He

told us to use the rest of his life to make him atone as we see fit, like he doesn't even have the will to live for himself anymore.

As much as it bothers me that he also doesn't seem all that motivated to take his atonement into his own hands, I may as well make him go along with all this, at the very least.

"Well, we don't know nearly enough about what's going on to form a plan. I think we need to start by gathering information before we do anything else."

Everything we've learned so far, both from Taboo and from Wakaba and company, is brand-new to all of us.

Even if we take for granted that it's all true—we'd never get anywhere if we doubted any of it at this point—I think we should still try to get more details from the people in the know.

"And so, Elder Ronandt, I'd like to return to the elf village for a while. Would you be willing to help with that?"

"But of course. Why, I'll take ye anywhere ye'd like, as long as I've been there before."

Ronandt flashes a confident grin.

It's no wonder people call him humanity's strongest mage.

He's got a very powerful presence.

I certainly feel better knowing that we have an authority on Spatial Magic here, and that he's willing to help us.

Without his teleportation prowess, all we'd be able to do is wander around lost in this unknown location.

That was probably what Wakaba was hoping for, but Elder Ronandt's arrival solves that problem.

From what I understand, Elder Ronandt had never been here, either. Nonetheless, he was able to get here by way of the connection between me and Fei, with whom I made a familiar contract.

Clearly it went well, even though it was apparently his first time attempting such a thing.

When he told me all this, I couldn't help but feel it was an unbelievable stroke of good luck.

The pieces fell into place for my rescue just in time, as if it was meant to be that way all along.

It's almost too good to be true, in fact.

I do actually have one theory about all this.

My unique skill, Divine Protection.

The effect of Divine Protection is fairly vague: It makes it easier

for me to gain the results you desire in any situation.

And since it's not the sort of thing you can visibly confirm, there's no way of knowing how much of all this is a result of the skill.

Personally, I've never once felt an unmistakable blessing at work from this skill.

So I always assumed it just meant that my luck was slightly improved.

But now, with things seemingly laid out in my favor right in front of my eyes, I'm starting to wonder if maybe this skill has a more dramatic effect than I realized.

And if my hunch is right, then I have a faint idea of why Wakaba would have gone out of her way to send me to this isolated place.

Maybe she saw me as too much of an unpredictable variable?

I have a powerful meta ability against the Demon Lord because I'm the Hero, and on top of that, I possess the wild card known as Divine Protection.

From Wakaba's point of view, it would make sense to want to remove me from play entirely.

I don't know for sure if that's really the reason, but I'm willing to bet it's not far off.

I need to find that out for sure, among other things.

Elder Ronandt completed his long-distance teleport spell while I was lost in thought, and now we're back in the elf village.

Except…

"Nobody seems to be here…"

Katia's murmured observation is right: The place is completely deserted.

"Nope, no good. I checked from up above, and there's nooobody here as far as I can see."

Fei comes flying down in dragon form with the same results.

"There were so many people here before. How did they all leave in such a short amount of time…?"

I knew the elves had been wiped out, but there should still have been the remnants of the imperial army and the demon army.

How in the world had several troops' worth of people gotten so far away so quickly that Fei couldn't find a trace of them?

"Well, there's no point wondering about it. It's the ends that matter, not the means, eh? And since it ends up that no one's here,

we'll just have to choose our next actions accordingly."

Elder Ronandt is right.

I can't just stand here thinking about how they moved so many people.

While I'm worried about the safety of the people who are now out of reach, like Anna and Hyrince, it won't do them any good to keep thinking about it.

Instead of trying to figure out a question to which I'll never find the answer, it's more important to focus on what we should do now.

"Should we go after them?"

As soon as I muttered it out loud, I realized it wasn't realistic.

"We haven't the slightest idea where they went. And since we don't know how they're traveling, there's no telling if we could even catch up to them at all."

As if to confirm my instinct, Katia points out the problems with this idea.

We wouldn't even know which direction they went in, and if they used teleportation or something like it, we'd be even less likely to find them at all.

And the longer we dawdle, the further the situation slips out of our control.

There's no time to waste.

"But in that case, what should we do instead…?"

My first instinct, asking Wakaba and the others for more information, was a bust.

Since the only plan was to figure things out once we had more information, not being able to get that information at all leaves us at a standstill.

"If you wish for information, surely there is one other with knowledge of the situation."

My eyes widen at Elder Ronandt's remark.

"The Word of God Pontiff."

The head of the faction opposing Wakaba and her side.

He certainly would be likely to know more than we do.

After all, he's the one who falsely presented Natsume as the new hero to the world.

That means he clearly has some connection to Wakaba, who was manipulating Natsume.

I don't know how much information they shared, nor how they ultimately wound up parting ways to lead opposite sides.

But that's just one more question I could ask him myself.

"I can bring us to the Holy Kingdom of Alleius if you'd like. Shall we go?"

"Yes, please. Thank you."

I nod firmly at Elder Ronandt.

There's no telling whether he'll talk to us if we show up uninvited.

But the fact is, I don't have any other leads.

Why waste time worrying about it when you can just take action, right?

Elder Ronandt's long-distance teleportation activates once more.

The scenery changes in front of us to the interior of a dome-shaped building.

At our feet is something that appears to be a teleport gate.

"Where are we?"

"The Holy Kingdom of Alleius has teleport gates that connect to every nation in the world. This is the gate that connects to the empire. That is how I arrived when I first came here, you see."

As he speaks, some soldiers on guard (I think?) come running up to us.

"I am Ronandt Orozoi, Head Mage of the Imperial Court! I seek an audience with the Pontiff of the Word of God!"

Ronandt bellows at the soldiers as they approach.

The effect on the soldiers is immediate.

But judging by the way they're exchanging glances and wavering about, they certainly don't seem like elite guardians of the teleport gates, an all-important facility of Alleius.

"Good heavens! Quit milling about and go convey the message, would you?!"

At that, the soldiers finally go running out of the room.

"…Perhaps we should not get our hopes too high, eh?"

Elder Ronandt shakes his head as he watches the soldiers scurrying away.

I have to agree.

If they're anything to go by, the Holy Kingdom of Alleius must be in a fair amount of chaos, too.

It's hard to imagine that the pontiff, no doubt already a busy man, would have time to meet with us when we've turned up without an appointment from out of the blue.

This might have been a fool's errand.

But contrary to my expectations, we only waited for a few minutes.

Then the soldiers returned and informed us they would take us to see the pontiff.

"I do appreciate your coming all this way. Though given the circumstances, I'm afraid I cannot provide as much hospitality as I would like, for which I sincerely apologize."

When we reach the pontiff, he greets us much more humbly than his position would imply.

He looks around at each of our faces with a gentle smile.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who sensed something far more mysterious lurking beneath that soft expression.

Then, when his eyes come to rest on Natsume, it turns to a show of surprise.

"Oh? Why, Prince Hugo. You are alive and well?"

"Hah! Bet it woulda been better for you if I was dead, huh?"

"Not at all. I am more than pleased that you survived."

The pontiff's tone sounds nothing but sincere as he gazes warmly at Natsume.

In response, Natsume looks taken aback.

…This man has a mysterious power all right.

I could easily get swallowed up by that gentle atmosphere of his.

So this is the Word of God Pontiff.

The leader who seeks to save humanity instead of the world.

"Please, have a seat anywhere you like. I am about to take the liberty to explain what direction our faction intends to take from this point on, and what we are going to do next."

The pontiff gestures to a long table suited to a meeting.

There are already several people seated there.

"You're quite well-prepared, eh?"

"Well, we were already about to have a strategy meeting, you see. Since your timing was so impeccable, I thought I would invite you to join us."

Elder Ronandt raises his eyebrows at the table, where the number of empty seats just so happens to perfectly coincide with our numbers.

"Hrmmm. I suppose we can leave it at that. But we didn't come

here to join your little team, just so you know ahead of time. We'll hear what you have to say, but don't go counting on us to help, eh?"

"E-Elder Ronandt?! Why?!"

"That's quite all right. I'd be more than pleased if you would hear us out first, then make your own decision."

I start spluttering when Elder Ronandt makes a proclamation that could easily be taken as a borderline threat, but the pontiff just nods magnanimously.

Looking a little peeved at this reaction, Elder Ronandt takes his seat a bit more forcefully than necessary.

The rest of us follow suit, sitting around the table as well.

Just then, I glance at Yuri from the corner of my eye.

Gazing at the pontiff intently, with eyes as deep and dark as the abyss…

Erm, should I not have seen that?

I'm creeped out, to be honest…

As a devout follower of the Word of God religion and the candidate for sainthood, it's all too easy to imagine that Yuri must have a lot of feelings about recent events.

Now I'm even more worried about Yuri flying off the handle than I am about Elder Ronandt making a scene.

My concerns about this meeting continue to deepen as I look around at the faces of the other people at the table.

There are seven of them, too, including the pontiff.

And while I've never met any of them, they're all so distinctive that I doubt I'll ever forget them after this.

To sum them up by appearance alone, there's a half-naked muscular man, a lovely young woman with a relaxed air, a person of indeterminate gender wearing a shady smile, a skinny man with a mohawk, a listless-looking lady, and a somewhat dense-looking punk.

The two women and the androgynous person look proper enough that they're not out of place at a meeting like this.

But the other three…

A half-naked guy, a mohawk man, and a punk…

They stick out like two very sore thumbs in a holy and important place like the headquarters of the Word of God religion.

Especially the mohawk man and the punk.

The half-naked guy manages to fit in well enough by having a

craggy, solemn air about him, but the other two look so ridiculous that I want to demand what post-apocalyptic setting they wandered in here from.

Then again, the half-naked guy would fit in that kind of setting, too, as some kind of buff autocrat…no, enough already! This is no time for such a ridiculous train of thought.

Their lineup was so distractingly strange that I lost sight of things for a second.

But while the three men are odd enough to draw most of the attention, the two women and the one androgynous person are clearly no ordinary individuals, either.

I can sense without needing to Appraise them that they're very powerful indeed.

"Perhaps we ought to begin by introducing ourselves. As I believe you may already know, I am the sixty-first pontiff of the Word of God, Dustin the 61st. And my esteemed guests here are the ancient dragons who have protected this world since time immemorial."

Ancient dragons?!

The pontiff's words startle me so much that I can't help taking a second look at the lineup.

I already knew from Fei's example that wyrms can take human form.

So I suppose it's no surprise that their evolved form, dragons, can do so, too—no, if anything, it would be stranger if they couldn't.

But while that part makes sense, I'm more surprised that dragons, especially ancient ones, would be here now.

Dragons are powerful monsters, with a danger rank of at least S, if not higher.

Ancient dragons must be even more so; I imagine they rate as legendary-class monsters, said to be untouchable by even the strongest of humans.

After all, as their name implies, they're dragons that have lived a very long time.

They say that dragons do not die of old age, nor do they become weaker as they get older.

In other words, the longer a dragon lives, the more powerful it becomes.

I can't even imagine how immensely strong an ancient dragon

must be.

But since we only barely defeated a freshly evolved earth dragon in the Great Elroe Labyrinth with a full party, I'm sure they're far beyond anything we could handle.

"I'm Nguyen, chief of the fire dragons."

While I'm still recovering from the fact that these are ancient dragons, the half-naked man introduces himself in a way that shocks me even further.

If he's the chief of the fire dragons, that must mean he's not just an ancient dragon—he's in charge of all the fire dragons, including other ancient ones.

I was surprised enough to find out that he was an ancient dragon, let alone a leader among them…

But there were even more surprises in store.

"I am Iena, chief of the water dragons."

The gentle-looking woman introduces herself as a chief, too.

"I'm the chief of the dark dragons, Reise."

"Name's Hyuvan, chief of the wind dragons, see."

"Call me Nia, chief of the ice dragons."

"Is it my turn?! I'm the great Gohka, chief of the lightning dragons!"

The ancient dragons each introduce themselves.

And they're all chiefs…

This is insane.

I'm amazed that so many powerful beings are assembled in this place, but I guess it's not entirely unbelievable, since the world quest is such a unique and dire situation.

Since they've all introduced themselves, we introduce ourselves, too.

Then, when everyone is done, the pontiff picks up where he left off.

"Now, we have quite a predicament on our hands."

"No kiddin'. And here we just finally finished off that damned Potimas Harrifenas…"

The half-naked man, Nguyen the fire dragon, nods gravely.

As I look around, I see the other dragon chiefs all seem to agree with him.

I guess all the dragons considered Potimas an enemy, too.

And since we came running to the elf village to rescue the elves, their apparent enemies, that would make us…no, let's forget

about that at the moment.

No point in worrying right now.

We might have to atone for it or something once everything settles down, but for now, we just have to focus on the problem at hand: the world quest.

Even if it's just delaying the inevitable, I'll forget about everything else for now.

Besides, if I start stressing about unresolved problems, then I'd have to go all the way back to the events that set us on the path to the elf village in the first place—the murder of my father, and the insurrection that it brought about in the Analeit Kingdom, my homeland.

Of course I'm worried about what's happening in my homeland right now.

But since we've already decided that the world quest is the top priority, I've got to push that to the back of my mind.

My abilities just aren't enough to tackle all these problems at once.

"Now, we in the Word of God religion have decided to support the ebony god, known also as Lord Güliedistodiez."

The pontiff already announced as much during the speeches that were broadcast to everyone as part of the world quest.

His speech was in direct opposition to the Demon Lord who spoke before him.

She's asking humanity to die in order to save the goddess.

He's asking the goddess to die in order to save humanity.

These are mutually exclusive positions, leaving no room for negotiation.

A clash between their two sides is inevitable; the ebony and ivory gods, essentially representatives of each position, have already begun their battle.

I'm sure the pontiff is far past the point of backing down.

"But at present, all we can do to support the ebony god, Lord Black Dragon, is to pray on his behalf. However, we have no intention of simply watching from the sidelines, either."

The pontiff's smile vanishes.

That alone seems to darken the entire room.

"There is another way to prevent the destruction of the system, aside from Lord Black Dragon's victory. Namely, an emergency suspension that can be enacted by utilizing ruler authority directly

in the system's core at the deepest part of the Great Elroe Labyrinth."

I can hardly believe my ears.

There's really another way?

I don't think the summary of the world quest mentioned anything like that.

"Few people possess ruler authority, and even fewer know that it can do such a thing, I am sure. Even I can hardly say for certain if this approach would succeed. Though the Taboo information implies that ruler authority can be used to directly interfere with the system, such a thing has never occurred in all of history. And since the ivory god appears to have her hands in the system already, I have my concerns that she may somehow reject any outside interference, even with ruler authority. Even so, I have no choice but to try."

I see.

So the pontiff is giving it a shot even if the outcome is unclear, not acting based on a high probability of victory.

"I must say, this sounds like a rather poor bet."

"It is indeed."

Just as Elder Ronandt points out, the odds don't seem very high.

On top of that, who knows if he'll even make it to the bottom of the Great Elroe Labyrinth?

We're talking about the biggest labyrinth in the world.

Mankind still doesn't dare to venture past the Upper Stratum, and even the Middle Stratum has turned back many renowned adventurers in the past.

The Lower Stratum beyond it is virtually unknown territory.

And the Bottom Stratum? Humanity hasn't even ascertained its existence.

"I've seen with my own eyes the terrors of the Great Elroe Labyrinth. I'll have ye know, even my strength was of no use in the Bottom Stratum."

Elder Ronandt has been in the Bottom Stratum?!

And even he wasn't strong enough to cut it down there?!

It must be even worse than I thought…

"I believe the assistance of my present company, the ancient dragon chiefs, will render such concerns moot."

Oh, right.

Although it's easy to forget, since they're all in human form, these people are all ancient dragons—and chiefs to boot.

They must be unbelievably powerful. Maybe they can even handle the monsters of the Great Elroe Labyrinth without breaking a sweat.

"The true problem lies not with the Great Elroe Labyrinth itself, but with Lady Ariel the Demon Lord and her army, who are no doubt guarding it as we speak."

The pontiff steeples his fingers, looking serious.

……?

For a moment, I can't even figure out what he's trying to say.

He makes it sound almost as if the Demon Lord's forces are already lying in wait at the labyrinth.

But that can't be possible.

Because she and her army were in the elf village just a few hours ago.

Considering the distance from the elf village to the Great Elroe Labyrinth, there's no way they could have reached the entrance yet.

"Yes, Lady Ariel and company have already reached the Great Elroe Labyrinth. It appears that they requisitioned an elf weapon and used it for transportation."

You're kidding, right?

I can't keep up with all these surprises.

Each new piece of information defies everything I thought I knew.

"Erm, what do you mean by a weapon?"

"An enormous flying ship, evidently a spaceship. It is unclear what sort of armaments it is equipped with. However, we have confirmation that the imperial soldiers who attacked the elf village are being protected in a village near the entrance to the Great Elroe Labyrinth. According to eyewitness accounts, it appears to have accommodated everyone who remained in the elf village."

A spaceship, huh…?

Ha-ha. I guess I really am out of my depth here…

"Do you know if our friends are with them? Like Anna and Mr. Hyrince?"

"Regretfully, we have not been able to ascertain that yet."

Maybe this wasn't the place to ask, but I couldn't help it out of concern for my friends.

The answer wasn't what I wanted to hear, though.

So we still don't know if Anna and Hyrince are safe…

Worrying won't help them, though.

How does the pontiff even know so much about the current state of the faraway Great Elroe Labyrinth anyway?

It feels like I'm getting one small glimpse of the terrifying power of the Word of God organization.

But if even their leader doesn't know whether my friends are safe, there's no way someone like me could find out, either.

All I can do is pray for their safety.

I'm sure they'll be fine.

Mr. Hyrince was the shieldsman of the hero party, and Anna is no slouch at magic, either.

…Although that's not much comfort after seeing the strength of people like Sophia and Kyouya.

Even so, I'll just have to cling to what little comfort I have.

"We will be attempting to infiltrate the system core, and no doubt Lady Ariel and company will attempt to stop us. The Word of God will take on Lady Ariel and her faction with all of our strength. I have already sent emissaries to all nations to request their support."

"You're going to drag the rest of the world into your war?!" I blurt out despite myself.

"They are already involved, I am afraid," the pontiff answers calmly. "The fate of the entire world hinges on the outcome of this conflict, after all."

He has a point, but this still doesn't seem right!

"Hrmmm. I wonder if increasing your numbers will really do much to improve your chances, eh?"

Elder Ronandt comments on something else that I was wondering about.

Having seen Sophia's and Kyouya's strength with my own eyes, I don't think outnumbering them would mean being able to beat them.

Even my attack power couldn't put a scratch on Sophia.

Which means no matter how many soldiers you sent in against her, they wouldn't be able to scratch her, either, if their stats are lower than mine.

You'd just be sending them to a pointless death.

I'm sure the pontiff is well aware of that.

"It is unlikely, I will admit that much."

Sure enough, the pontiff confirms our suspicions.

"Then what is your goal?"

Elder Ronandt's glare deepens as he presses the subject.

He's trying to figure out why the pontiff would call for more people if he knows they won't make a difference in the battle.

"It's a matter of personal feelings. If the system is destroyed, those most likely to die will be individuals with more skills—that is to say, those who have the power to fight. Will they sit and await the end, or will they believe in their own strength and join the fight? I wish to let each of them decide that for themselves. We will not force anyone to participate, of course."

I guess that kind of makes sense…?

It's true that in this situation, a lot of people will want to do something, anything, to make a difference.

That's certainly how I feel.

So in a way, I can see the logic behind giving them somewhere to fight if they choose.

It might be better than sitting around helplessly.

"Hmph! And what are you *really* after?"

"Recovering any amount of energy we can."

"Wha—?!"

When Elder Ronandt irritably repeats his question, the pontiff answers completely casually.

But contrary to his easy tone, his words are unbelievably cruel.

"You mean…you're sending them to die, to fuel the system?"

I'm fully aware that my expression has gotten darker and my tone lower.

"Just so. Whether we win or lose this battle, we will still require an enormous amount of energy either way. And skills improve quite quickly in a life-or-death battle, as well as leveling up. It's a very promising opportunity to collect more energy."

"What…? What do you take human lives for?!"

I clench my fists and glare at the pontiff, unable to tolerate the indifferent way he's treating people as nothing but an energy source.

"A necessary sacrifice."

"…!"

I almost jump out of my seat, but Elder Ronandt puts his hand out to stop me.

"Nothing you say will stop this man. For now, we had best hear

what he has to say."

"…Right."

I reluctantly sink back into my chair.

Elder Ronandt is right: The pontiff probably won't listen to me, no matter what I say.

And I'm not strong enough to stop him by force.

For now, I should just stay silent and listen.

It's not like my emotional outbursts changed anything during the discussion with Wakaba and the others, either.

If anything, all I did was make a scene for no reason.

Nothing I said struck a chord with Wakaba and her group. I didn't affect anything.

My words don't have enough power for that.

No amount of empty platitudes can change the minds of people who are truly determined, like the pontiff or Wakaba. By comparison, anything I say just rings hollow.

I can't stand being so powerless!

"So most of those forces are doomed to die. And you'll use them as a cover while you and your handpicked squad infiltrate the Great Elroe Labyrinth, eh?"

"That's exactly right."

"Hrmmm, I see. Well, I shan't comment on the soundness of that strategy for the time being. What I want to know is what comes after that."

Elder Ronandt levels his gaze at the pontiff.

"If you do emerge victorious, what exactly do you plan to do next, eh? At this rate, we're still on the slow path to destruction, as anyone who has read Taboo can tell. The ivory god's side is aiming to turn that around, even if it's by extreme measures like destroying the system. But what of the ebony god's side? Would you care to explain what you intend to do about it?"

"…You never fail to impress, Elder Ronandt. Always seeing through to the heart of the matter and asking the hardest questions of all."

The pontiff wore a smile that was more like a grimace.

Of course. This might be a battle with the fate of the world at stake, but there's still the matter of what happens once it's over.

If anything, the aftermath is what the battle is all about.

The ivory god's side intends to sacrifice more than half of humanity to complete the restoration of this planet once and for all.

So what about the ebony god's side?

"This is what the text of the world quest said: 'If the ebony god wins, Goddess Sariel and her successor, the ebony god, will be sacrificed, and humanity and the planet will be saved.' So your people intend to offer up your leader as a sacrifice, is that right?"

"…Our lord himself asked it of us."

Nguyen speaks up solemnly to answer Ronandt's question.

So the ebony god is their "lord"?

The pontiff did call him "Lord Black Dragon" earlier. Maybe dragons are all the ebony god's followers or something.

"If that is what he wishes, then far be it from me to say otherwise, I suppose. But that is not what I am asking. Pontiff, I want to hear your honest-to-goodness opinion. *Will it be enough?*"

"…It will not."

"Huh?!"

I look back and forth between the pontiff and Elder Ronandt, aghast.

It won't be enough?

Does he mean that if the ebony god wins and sacrifices himself, there still won't be enough energy?

And from the way Elder Ronandt asked the question, did he somehow suspect this already?

"Just as I thought. From what I gather of the ebony god's personality, he would surely have sacrificed himself long ago were such a thing sufficient to save the world."

My jaw is still on the floor.

Elder Ronandt really is amazing.

He only just recently acquired Taboo, yet he's already able to assess the ebony god's personality and his likely course of action.

Now that he mentions it, I guess a god who's willing to sacrifice himself, but hasn't done it already, must have a good reason for holding off until now.

And that reason is simple: It wouldn't be enough.

"And? What do you intend to do to make up for that deficit, eh?"

"I will destroy the Word of God religion."

…What is the pontiff even saying?

I can't wrap my head around all this anymore.

"The church has lost its authority in the wake of recent events. All this time, we have covered up the truth about this world, forced

humans and demons to continue fighting, and been the cause of all major conflict. Our church is the root of all evil, the perpetrator that drove the Goddess Sariel to the brink of death. With all this to set the stage, the goddess religion will wage all-out war against us, and we will be defeated."

I don't understand. What does all this mean?

"So you would sacrifice yourselves alongside the ebony god, then?"

"Indeed."

The pontiff confirms Elder Ronandt's interpretation.

"…That will result in the death of many, if still less than half of humanity."

"This, too, is a necessary sacrifice. We are far beyond the point of being able to settle things without any loss of life."

Necessary sacrifices…

That probably includes the pontiff himself, too.

If things play out the way he described, surely the leader of the Word of God religion would not be spared.

The Word of God is the largest religion in the world, worshipped by most nations.

If they were to clash with the second-largest religion, the goddess worshippers, there would surely be a lot of bloodshed.

And while the Word of God has far more power originally, I'm sure many nations would side with the goddess religion instead.

Besides, given that the goddess religion has managed to thrive all these years despite being far outnumbered by the Word of God religion, they must be strong in their own right.

A war like that could easily divide the world in two.

So even if the world quest was over, we'd still be a far cry from peace.

"Even so, I do wish to keep the number of lives lost as low as we possibly can," the pontiff continues. "And I believe there is a way we can do just that."

"Of course…there's another god."

This last comment comes from Katia, who's been silently listening until now.

Even sacrificing both the Goddess Sariel and the ebony god wouldn't make for enough energy.

But there is one other god.

The one who's fighting the ebony god right now: the ivory

god…Wakaba.

In other words, the pontiff's people are planning not just to defeat Wakaba, but to sacrifice her to the system.

"Damn, that's cold."

Even I have to agree with Natsume's muttered comment.

I do have a grudge against Wakaba for killing my elder brother Julius, of course.

I'm sure Natsume resents her for using him, too.

But even then, the pontiff's methods are so incredibly heartless that I can't help feeling like it's going too far.

Still, I'm sure the pontiff will do it.

Because it's a necessary sacrifice.

The pontiff really does intend to kill every last god in order to save humanity.

"Though of course, none of this matters unless we can secure victory."

The pontiff puts on a warm, guileless smile.

I don't know how he can smile like that when everything he's said is so cold.

It's mysterious and downright disturbing, far beyond the realm of my comprehension.

But the words that follow seem to reveal a truthful glimpse at his innermost anguish, in stark contrast with his unsettling smile.

"At any rate, such is our plan of action. I am more than aware that it is built on an immense number of sacrifices; I know, too, that we are repaying the kindness of the gods with terrible ingratitude, a shameless and unforgivable act. Even so, we have no other option but to win."

Maybe that gentle smile is really a mask to hide his true feelings.

His tone is so tormented that it makes me wonder.

The pontiff stands.

Then he bows his head to us deeply.

"Is there any way that you would be willing to lend us your strength to help lead humanity to victory?"

I'm the Hero, and I have the Mercy skill, too.

Elder Ronandt is a Spatial Magic master, and has even been to the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

With his help, they could easily teleport deep into the labyrinth.

Then there's Natsume, who has the Lust and Greed skills.

I'm sure having more members with ruler authority would give them a better chance of success at accessing the system core and preventing its destruction.

We still have serious value in many ways, even if might not make much difference on the battlefield.

I'm sure the pontiff is desperate to recruit us no matter what.

That's why he's bowing his head like this.

A man who's clearly so willing to go to any lengths necessary for his goals could easily cast aside his pride to entreat someone for help.

Elder Ronandt gives me a pointed look.

He's signaling for me to explain things in my own words.

"Please, raise your head."

At that, the pontiff looks up.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we can't help you."

The tension in the room heightens sharply as soon as I speak those words.

All the stares feel like a blade held against my throat.

Swallowing hard, I force myself to continue.

"However, that doesn't mean we'll be siding with the ivory god, either. We will refrain from joining either faction and instead search for a way to resolve things without any sacrifices."

The pressure seems to lighten just a little.

Instead, both the pontiff and the ancient dragon chiefs stare at me as if they're dealing with a stubborn child.

From their perspective, I'm sure what I'm saying sounds naive, if not downright delusional.

Like the nonsensical babbling of a kid who refuses to face reality.

Even so, I refuse to give up.

"'I know I'm just dreaming. I don't care if people laugh at me for being unrealistic. But there's nothing wrong with having a goal to strive for. Mine is a world where everyone can live happily in peace. And I'll keep chasing that ideal until I die.' …That's what my elder brother, Julius the Hero, once said."

The pontiff's eyes widen ever so slightly at those words.

"I'm going to strive for the same goal that my brother did."

Now the pontiff closes his eyes, as if he's given up on convincing me otherwise.

"Heh-heh! You said it, kid! I might just hafta join ya, then!"

That bellowed declaration comes from Hyuvan, the mohawk-sporting chief of the wind dragons.

“Now hang on…”

“Ba-ha-ha! That spider dame did us wind dragons a solid not long ago, see! I was never too keen on goin’ up against her in the first place! So how can I say no to jumpin’ on this crazy train?!”

Despite Nguyen’s attempts at placating him, Hyuvan heaves himself up like a drunkard, jumps across the table to land behind me, and throws his arm over my shoulders.

Does this person (?) have any concept of personal space?!

“Perhaps I shall join you as well, then.”

Another unexpected voice chimes in.

It’s Nia, the lovely, languid-looking woman who called herself the chief of the ice dragons.

“Nia?”

Iena, the water dragon, addresses her with a prickly-sounding tone.

“Why, I owe a debt of gratitude to the ivory god as well, dear elder sister.”

“You just don’t want to fight if you don’t have to.”

“It’s nothing of the sort, I assure you.”

Iena fixes her with a frosty gaze, which Nia handily avoids.

Maybe my initial impression of Iena as a gentle-seeming soul was wrong.

“Hang on. Hyuvan, Nia…do you realize what you’re saying?”

“Hell yeah I do! No takebacks!”

“Well, whatever will be, will be.”

At their responses, Nguyen puts a hand to his forehead as if fending off a headache.

“You would disregard our lord’s decree?”

Iena’s voice grows icier as she addresses the pair.

“Sure! No regrets here!”

Hyuvan responds cheerfully, without an ounce of ill will.

Iena is the first to react.

She stands up slowly from her chair, anger rolling off her in waves.

“Iena, wait.”

“No, I shan’t.”

“But if we fight among ourselves, our enemies on the ivory god’s side will reap the benefits, wouldn’t you say?”

Reise, the chief of the dark dragons, manages to talk Iena down.

She returns to her seat with a click of her tongue.

…Iena, who looked like the gentlest of them, might actually be the most combative.

“Why don’t we just let Hyuvan and Nia do as they please, hmm?”

But Reise’s next words cause Nguyen to stand up instead.

“Reise!”

“At this point, they’re bound to leave whether we allow it or not anyway. Even if we make them stay, they’ll be no use to us if their hearts aren’t in it, now will they? I doubt they’d go as far as to stab us in the backs or anything, but it’s probably best not to have worries like that in the first place by keeping them here.”

Reise shrugs.

“Besides, I must say I sympathize with Hyuvan and Nia. I don’t want our master to die, either.”

“No, but…”

Iena’s expression clouds, as do those of the other dragon chiefs.

Looking at them, it seems clear that they’re all deeply devoted to the ebony god.

“At a time like this, we oughtta decide for ourselves what we wanna do for once instead of blindly following orders like usual, don’t you think?”

The other ancient dragons look conflicted as they contemplate Reise’s words.

“Well, like I said, I’m throwin’ in my lot with these kiddies.”

“As am I.”

Hyuvan and Nia refuse to change their minds.

“…I shall carry out our orders, nevertheless.”

“…Me too.”

Iena and Nguyen won’t budge from the other side.

“I dunno what’s goin’ on, but we gotta thrash Ariel, yeah?!”

Gohka, the chief of the lightning dragons, is apparently sticking with the pontiff, too.

(How does he still not know what’s going on, though…?)

All eyes turn to the last of the chiefs, Reise.

“Tell me, Hero.”

For some reason, Reise is looking at me.

“Just how passionate are you about chasing this ideal of yours?”

“Passionate?”

“Oh yes. Do you intend to make it happen no matter what the cost? Or are you just vaguely hopeful that you might manage somehow? I want to know what’s going through your mind.”

I think for a moment about their question.

“To be honest, I have no way of knowing whether we can make it happen or not. If anything, I’m sure the odds of us failing are much higher than succeeding. It’s probably just about impossible. But personally, I don’t think that’s a good enough reason to give up without even trying. So as unlikely as it may be, I’m going to give it everything I’ve got.”

I can tell even as I’m speaking that I’m not explaining myself very eloquently.

But these are my honest feelings.

Reise’s eyes close for a moment.

“All right, then.”

Then they open their eyes and look at me again.

“I’m going to join up with our hero here, too.”

Iena and Nguyen stare at Reise in surprise.

Judging by their reactions, he must usually be really faithful to the ebony god’s orders.

“I’m in the mood to roll the dice on all his talk about giving it everything he’s got, that’s all.”

As Reise says this, they pierce me with a stare so sharp that it sends a shiver down my spine.

It’s like a signal that I’d better not go back on my word, or else.

I resist the urge to flinch and stare right back instead, trying to prove that I truly meant every word.

“…It appears I shall have to rethink my entire strategy.”

The pontiff sounds exhausted.

From his perspective, he’s just lost three of his strongest fighters.

That must be a headache all right.

“…It is much too late for me to change our direction now. But do know that I am in full support of your endeavor. I wish you the best of luck.”

You too, Pontiff.

I didn’t say that response out loud.

I can’t join forces with either the ebony god’s or the ivory god’s side. I won’t.

But I don’t want either of them to die, either.

So in my heart, I prayed for the pontiff and his people to be safe.

Please, let there be a way for this to end without a single sacrifice.

Even if it is a fantasy that’s too good to be true, I’ll search for it all the same.

Balto

Ah, I see. My life is flashing before my eyes.

I accepted the memories flitting through my mind with surprising serenity.

The images that play out in my mind's eye start with my childhood, move on to my adulthood, and reach the point of my working in the Demon Lord's castle.

In accordance with my status as the eldest son of Duke Phthalo, an esteemed demon noble, I strode the path to success in life from a young age.

But I climbed the ranks because the demon race was in a dire shortage of staff, not because my hard work and capabilities had been acknowledged.

I am not saying this out of humility; indeed, I do believe I have worked harder than most.

However, I am equally confident that I fell short of the late Commander Agner of the First Army in every respect, my younger brother Bloe in physical might, Sixth Commander Huey in magical prowess, and Sanatoria in cunning.

The fact that I was overly successful despite being surrounded by people with superior skills is likely due in some part to my noble birth and the nature of the times.

Between the disappearance of the Demon Lord and the loss of much of the previous generation in the ongoing war with humanity, the demon race was simply shorthanded.

As such, I was not so much pleased with my promotions as I was utterly exhausted and swamped with work.

I devoted my every waking moment to restoring the battered remains of the demon race.

And that did not change even when the current Demon Lord

took her throne.

In fact, I only became even busier.

All of my efforts toward internal affairs and replenishing the troops were sent back to square one when we were forced into a large-scale battle with the humans.

I found this shameful, of course, but I could not defy the Demon Lord.

Since we could never hope to win if we rebelled against her, our only option was to fight against the humans, against whom we at least stood a sliver of a chance.

In the end, that war was a draw.

Three commanders—Sir Agner, Huey, and my brother Bloe—were never to return.

I do not even wish to estimate the lives lost.

But many of humanity's strongest were defeated, including their hero.

One thing is clear: There was significant damage to both sides.

All according to the Demon Lord's plan.

The Demon Lord's goal was not victory for demonkind.

She sought only for there to be as many deaths as possible, human and demon alike.

I finally understood why after hearing her speech in the world quest broadcast.

Even so, I have opinions of my own.

Demons have long fought against humanity.

Indeed, we have been at war as far back as the earliest recorded history.

It has gone on so long that our race was at the very brink of being beyond recovery.

All for the sake of this world.

To serve as its fuel.

To atone for the sins of those who once used a massive amount of MA energy to turn themselves into demons out of personal greed.

I do think it is unfortunate that all this still was not enough.

But I find it hard to forgive her for dismissing demonkind's years of effort as "carefree" and declaring that she expects so little out of us.

If that is true, what have I worked so hard for all this time?

Why did Bloe have to die?

What of Sir Agner, and Huey, the many soldiers who died in

that battle, and all those demons who died in all of history before then?

Is she saying that all of that was pointless?

And that she will take even more from us, as if she still has not taken enough?

When I relive the moment when I heard of Bloe's death, when I cried alone in a room, I am filled with a terrible rage.

And the sequence of memories continues from there.

This next one was right after the world quest was announced.

"What in the world is going on…?"

I hung my head in the meeting room.

All of these unprecedented events were taking place while the Demon Lord was away on business.

Of course I was in despair.

"Why are you asking *us* that, hmm?"

Sanatoria shook her head and sighed as she responded, looking unimpressed with my attitude yet equally perplexed herself.

There were a few other commanders in the room, too.

But some of them had perished in the previous battle, while others still were traveling with the Demon Lord.

That left only four of us here.

The Second Army Commander, Sanatoria.

The Third Army Commander, Kogou.

The Fifth Army Commander, Darad.

And, of course, myself.

This meeting, of course, was about the world quest announcement that we all suddenly heard.

What did it mean by telling us to either prevent or assist an evil god's plot?

And what exactly *is* a world quest anyway?

Nothing like this has ever occurred in the history of demonkind, as far as I know.

"…Please tell me each of your opinions."

I managed to squeeze out a question without raising my head.

"How? We don't have nearly enough information to form an opinion. It all sounds like nonsense to me, and no amount of discussion will bring us any closer to the truth."

Sanatoria's opinion, as it were, was more than fair.

She was absolutely right.

<World quest activated.
An evil god is plotting to sacrifice humanity in order to prevent the destruction of the world. You must either prevent this plot, or assist with it.>

Though we all heard this sudden announcement, I frankly had no idea what it meant.

As far as I could tell, it seemed that all of demonkind heard this announcement, too.

I hadn't received reports from the entire race, of course, so perhaps it was limited to the vicinity of the Demon Lord's castle.

Or it could be that all demons heard it, but not humans.

But I had no way of finding out for sure right away.

Not that we would necessarily make any more progress even if I did find out.

Who in the world is this evil god, anyway?

How are we supposed to either hinder or assist them?

There wasn't nearly enough detail to understand the situation at hand.

And without more information, there was no way of knowing what choice to make.

Perhaps the Demon Lord would know more…

It was terrible timing that this should occur while she was away.

"Even so, surely we ought to do something. The populace is in an uproar."

I myself didn't know what was going on.

The average citizens were confused and at a loss.

Many of them must be frightened, too.

After all, the contents of that so-called world quest sounded deeply unsettling.

We'd only just concluded a massive war with humanity.

In the worst-case scenario, the public's pent-up frustration might reach a breaking point and lead to mass riots.

There was already plenty of opposition to the government, thanks to the compulsory enlistment of troops and the subsequent war.

The only thing keeping it at bay was the public's deep-rooted fear of the Demon Lord.

Now that she was away for the moment, any small spark could set everything aflame.

As such, we in the government needed to make some sort of announcement regarding this world quest business to prevent a full-on uprising.

"Sure, but we don't know any more than they do, right? And we can't go running our mouths without information to back it up. It doesn't seem wise to come out and admit that we're totally in the dark, either, does it?"

"…Good point."

That in itself could be the spark that sets off the powder keg.

The citizens would think us utterly incompetent.

And considering that we really didn't know anything about the current situation, they might even be right.

"…Do you have any thoughts, Kogou?"

"Huh?! Oh, uh…sorry. I don't get all this complicated stuff…"

Sure enough, Kogou didn't appear to have any bright ideas. I can't say I was surprised.

"Darad?"

"Hrmmm. Were these ordinary times, we ought to look to the Demon Lord for instructions, but I suppose in this case we cannot."

Darad crossed his arms and sank into thought.

Though he is a staunch supporter of the Demon Lord, he is otherwise a sharp-minded tactician.

But it seems even he could not make a decision about this on the spot.

Nor could I, evidently…

"But as you say, Sir Balto, we cannot sit idly by. Our best course of action for now is to issue an announcement that we are investigating further and instruct the populace to remain calm."

"…Yes, that may be the most pragmatic choice."

We could at least give the impression that we are investigating the matter, even if it would be little more than stalling for time.

It should be somewhat effective, if not enough to quell all the malcontents.

"Perhaps we should go on high alert and increase patrols in the city?"

"But won't it set people off just as much if we put too many soldiers out on patrol?"

"True enough… Let us send soldiers from door-to-door under the pretense of surveying the populace, then. We do need to find out whether everyone heard that announcement, at any rate."

“That’s not a bad idea. Then we can increase the number of soldiers on the streets without raising too many hackles.”

“And we can also use that opportunity to demonstrate that we are investigating.”

Thanks to Darad’s proposed solution, we began to figure out an initial plan of action.

It wouldn’t solve the root of the problem, of course; still, we should at least be able to keep the ensuing chaos in the city to a minimum.

“Can I entrust this to the Second Army?”

“Of course.”

“That’s all well and good for here in the city, but what about everywhere else?”

“As much as I would like to do the same elsewhere, we simply do not have the manpower. At best, we could perhaps send a single messenger on horseback to each major town.”

“Hrm. The Fifth Army can handle that, then.”

“Thank you.”

Our discussion was proceeding smoothly.

I had no idea what we were going to do before I started the meeting, so I was relieved that we’d at least managed to come up with emergency measures.

Even if one of our number was doing little more than sitting silently in a chair.

“The main problem is that we still don’t know what’s going on with this alleged world quest.”

“Right.”

That message was most likely a divine communication from on high.

It must be of the utmost importance, then.

Which means it would be unwise to stay in the dark about its meaning.

“Honestly. Now what should we do…?”

I couldn’t stop myself from letting out a sigh and a grumbled complaint.

Just then…

<World quest sequence 1. Installing Taboo in all humanoids.>

“…What?! Ah! Guh?!”

Another announcement echoed from out of nowhere.

Before I could process what the words meant, my head was assailed with terrible pain, and I slumped over the table.

Unable to bear the discomfort of what felt like boiling hot water being poured directly into my brain, I soon lost consciousness entirely.

Ah, yes, now I remember.

When we woke up, we all knew exactly what Taboo truly meant, and then learned the Demon Lord's true motivations through the "world quest sequence 2" and onward.

It was then that I decided to choose.

To fight.

From there, things unfolded quickly.

I personally went on our fastest horse to the human empire to issue a cease-fire, while Sanatoria stayed behind to recruit volunteers and form a new army.

Where I feared that our proposal of a truce would be met with opposition, I instead found ready agreement, and we were even granted permission to use the empire's teleport gates.

From the speed of their decision, I could tell that they, too, were past the point of picking and choosing their allies.

"If I wished to call myself a loyal retainer of the Demon Lord, I ought to try and stop you."

Before I left, Fifth Army Commander Darad said this to me in a low voice.

"…I suppose this means I was not worthy to truly become her loyal retainer, then."

He gave a lonesome-sounding laugh.

We commanders were never in perfect agreement, of course.

There were some, like Sanatoria, who tried to rebel against the Demon Lord, while others, like Huey, were cowed into submission by her might.

But virtually none of the trueborn demon commanders ever held full loyalty to the Demon Lord deep down.

Not even First Commander Agner, nor myself, had sworn ourselves to serve her out of devoted fealty.

If we did not serve her, demonkind would be doomed.

And so we had no other choice.

Among all of us commanders, Darad was the only trueborn

demon who harbored heartfelt loyalty toward the Demon Lord.

Part of this was due to his family's historically deep commitment to whomever was appointed Demon Lord.

Now, Darad was born into that family during an era when the Demon Lord's throne was vacant.

So I can only imagine how he felt when, after dreaming for so long of serving a Demon Lord, he was finally given the chance to serve by one's side as a commander.

All I know is that his loyalty was sincere.

And yet even faithful Darad was not permitted to fight alongside her at the last.

When the Demon Lord left to attack the elf village, she brought only those commanders whom she had personally appointed.

Darad's loyalty never got through to her.

Then the world quest was announced, the Demon Lord's true intentions were revealed, and she began to set the stage for the final battle.

"Go on, then. I will take charge of maintaining the peace in our territory."

Torn between his loyalty to the Demon Lord and his responsibilities as a demon noble, Darad ultimately decided to abstain from the fight entirely.

Just as he said, if he were to see his fealty through to the end, it would no doubt be his duty to stop me now that I've chosen to oppose her.

But at the same time, Darad is a noble with vassals of his own.

I am sure he could not bear to deliberately let them die.

Having said that, no doubt he was equally unable to turn his sword against the Demon Lord.

I cannot call his decision half-hearted.

Before I set out ahead of the rest to make contact with the humans, I instructed Sanatoria to recruit only those who were willing to fight for our expedition.

We're going up against the Demon Lord.

If we fight her, we're likely to die.

Dragging reluctant soldiers into a battle in which they know they'll die would only slow us down.

So we will bring only those soldiers who know that they'll die and are determined to fight anyway.

And the demon army that was thus formed was larger than I

expected.

"That's a lot."

"It sure is."

Sanatoria responded to my candid observation with a lazy drawl.

This, too, was an unexpected development: Sanatoria came with them.

"I thought you were going to stay behind."

"…Yes, well, I'm already starting to wonder why I didn't."

Sanatoria sighed, but it didn't look like she was going to run away.

"I was a world-famous actress, you know."

"You looked at your reincarnation history?"

"Of course. I take it from your response that you did as well?"

"A little, yes."

The Taboo menu includes a reincarnation history.

It contains a complete log of all the previous lives one has lived.

I suppose you might say it recalls memories that are embedded in your soul.

When you choose each life, you can actually recall the memories of that time.

I selected the memories of my first life, and that alone brought back an enormous amount of memories.

It was so intense that I thought my mind might implode from the shock of remembering so many things at once.

Fortunately, I only experienced a bit of dizziness, not enough to pass out.

But if that happened from just one round of memories, I imagine recalling all of them would be dangerous.

No doubt my Records skill is the reason I got off relatively lightly.

More importantly, this must be why a non-combat-related skill like this exists in the system at all.

"I starred in quite a few movies, as it happens."

"That's impressive."

"But none of them survived, of course."

Any kind of recording mediums deteriorate quite quickly within the system.

While books and such can survive by way of transcription, there is no such method for preserving films and the like.

Not a single one of the films starring Sanatoria's first life as an actress is anywhere to be found in this world.

"My final moments were awfully anticlimactic, too. When I saw those memories, I wound up feeling sad all of a sudden, wondering what the point of my life was. Which made me feel like I'd better not run away from this fight now. Awfully unlike me, isn't it?"

"…I suppose."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Well, it's hardly fair if I tell you all this and you don't give me a single detail, is it?"

"You're the one who brought it up."

"Oh, come on."

With a sigh, I adjusted the position of my glasses.

"I was royalty in a rather large kingdom."

"Really? You were a prince?"

"More or less. Still, the government was led by a parliament. I didn't have any real power."

Unlike my present life, in which I manage the demon government almost entirely on my own, I had no power whatsoever in my first life.

All I had was my duties as a royal.

It was a strict, stuffy life, nothing more.

"Even so, I loved my motherland, and all of its citizens."

That land didn't even exist anymore.

"So this time, I want to do everything I can to protect them."

Even if it means biting the hands that fed us.

Even if it costs my life.

I gaze out at the swarm of black shadows enshrouding the earth.

Every one of them is a spider monster.

And at their heart is enshrined the strongest of them all: a massive queen taratect.

Though we're still some distance away, I can already feel fear rising at the terribly imposing sight.

Nearby, I hear someone swallow hard.

Or perhaps the sound came from my own throat.

We of the demon army have issued forth to the field where lies the entrance to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

The spider army, led by the queen taratect, is positioned

directly in front of that entrance.

Far from the demon army, a human army is in position as well.

Given that we are sworn enemies who were trying to kill one another until not long ago, we could hardly set forth to fight side by side.

However, we managed to create a pincer formation around the spider army.

Though we cannot entrust our backs to each other, we still found a way to fight cooperatively.

A fearsome thunderbolt drops toward the queen taratect.

This signals the start of the battle.

The taratect army surges forward, as if the ground itself is moving in waves.

“Prepare the massive magic! Shields, at the ready!”

I shout.

“Not yet! Hold! Wait until they get closer!”

The tide bears down upon us.

A massive swarm that invokes visceral revulsion.

“Fire!”

On my signal, our allied forces unleash massive magic.

The spells mow down the oncoming surge of spiders.

But the next wave of taratects is already close behind.

“Next round! Fire!”

This, too, was within my calculations.

The massive magic spells shoot forth at deliberate intervals.

Even so, the taratects keep coming.

It’s only a matter of time until a wave gets past the massive magic and reaches our front line of shieldsmen.

“Don’t be afraid! Each of them is weak on their own! Remain calm and deal with them one at a time!”

It’s safe to assume the spiders do not fear death.

But the same is true of our side, too.

“We stake our lives for the future of demonkind!”

“Balto! Balto! Come on, get a grip!”

My eyes snap open.

What was that?

…Oh, right, my life was flashing before my eyes.

Does that mean I’m dead, and this is the afterlife?

“Balto! You’re finally awake?!”

“Nngh… Sanatoria? Did you die, too?”

“Have you lost your mind?! I’m still alive, and so are you!”

As my consciousness gradually returns, my mind clears, and I finally grasp reality.

I’m…alive?!

“Urgh! What’s going on?!”

“The front line hasn’t fallen yet. Kogou is holding it steady.”

I jump to my feet at that, only to be rewarded with a fresh jab of pain behind my forehead.

An attack must have struck my head during battle and knocked me out for a moment.

I’ve been doing nothing but desk work for so long that I’m no longer in prime condition for fighting on the front lines.

What’s more, I haven’t even had time for training lately. My strength has definitely dulled.

I shake my head to pull myself together.

When I finally refocus on the battlefield, the situation is far from favorable.

Everywhere I look, soldiers are locked in battle with spider monsters.

Our battle formation hardly matters anymore.

The spiders have jumped across every line, infiltrating our ranks with ease.

On top of that, the larger, evolved individuals have far higher stats than the small ones.

While there aren’t as many of them as the smallest kind, the mere arrival of such a large monster inevitably breaks through the lines.

Then a swarm of smaller spiders pours in through that opening.

The result is a chaotic melee in which friend and foe are all jumbled together.

As I take all this in, my legs nearly give way beneath me.

That’s not a good sign. I must not have fully healed from the damage yet.

I instinctively reach out and grab something nearby for support, which helps me avoid falling right back down onto the ground.

But my eyes widen when I see what I’m holding on to.

It’s the corpse of a gigantic spider monster.

…Ah, that’s right.

This thing charged toward me and struck me on the head…

Someone must have defeated it after I was knocked unconscious.

Which means Sanatoria was likely the one who took command of that fight.

“Thank you, Sanatoria.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I shake my head again, trying to concentrate.

Then I reach up a hand to my still-throbbing forehead and use Healing Magic.

“Actually, Balto, the healers are running low on mana. If you can use Healing Magic, could you focus on that instead?”

“The mages?”

“Mm-hmm. These things aren’t much of a threat individually—it’s the poison that’s the problem.”

“Ah…”

That certainly is a problem.

As far as I can tell, the small spiders are fairly weak.

Any of our soldiers can easily defeat them with a single blow.

However, there are so many of them that it’s impossible to wipe them all out without taking any hits at all.

Their stats seem to be low enough that being surrounded and bitten by them wouldn’t cause much damage. But if those fangs are poisonous, that’s another story entirely.

“All right. I’ll go around and cast antidote spells.”

“Thanks.”

I rushed around the battlefield, using antidote magic on the sick-looking soldiers.

The small spiders aren’t a major threat.

They’re light and can jump long distances, enough that they were able to make a mess of our ranks at first, but once we’ve learned the pattern, dealing with them is simple.

As long as we stay calm and stick to a strategy, there’s no problem.

Their stats are so low that even a bite would barely amount to a scratch.

If someone gets poisoned, I or one of the other mages can heal them.

And so we gradually rebuild our ranks, and with help from Kogou’s frenzied fighting on the front lines, we manage to make steady progress in battle.

The biggest difficulty is the larger spiders, and the even larger ones that seem to be a more evolved variety.

These giant, evolved spiders are strong enough to take out several soldiers at once, but our men and women are already fighting fiercely with the assumption that they might not survive.

Their reckless attacks, heedless of injury, are able to take down even these giant spiders.

Morale is still going strong, even as several soldiers are sacrificed in the process.

If anything, our troops only grow more determined as time goes on.

A strange and powerful fervor spreads through the ranks.

It's so strong that they don't even seem to care about their own lives.

Normally, it would be dangerous to let this kind of fervor take control of the battle.

As much as it's producing results, it's also increasing the number of deaths due to desperate, self-sacrificial attacks.

If we were focused on the future, it would be better to withdraw and have them cool off.

But these soldiers are here to protect what's precious to them, even if it means throwing away their futures.

So I must let this fervor take control.

We must surpass our limits, and keep pushing forward, forward!

Even I am beginning to lose myself to the feverish haze.

But then something douses the flames.

"What's that?"

I might not have noticed it if I was fighting directly instead of focusing on giving orders and healing the poisoned or wounded.

It only caught my attention because I was keeping an eye on my surroundings to better inform my instructions.

Something strange was happening near the entrance of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

In that area, an intense battle was unfolding between the queen taratect and some ancient dragons presumed to serve the ebony god.

The rumbles and flashes of thunder and lightning reached as far as our side of the battlefield, and I could see fire dragons flying through the sky, raining fireballs on the ground below.

It was a downright hellish scene, taking place not just in reality but right before my eyes.

And a strange shift was occurring there now.

As I took a closer look, I saw a tidal wave of white burst forth from the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Not water—but a swarm of white spiders.

"N-Nightmare's Vestiges!"

This was a monster the human side warned me to be wary of in advance.

They said that even the hero's party struggled to defeat a single one.

How can there be so many of such a powerful monster…?

The white wave gets swept up in the battle between the queen taratect and the ancient dragons, only to break through that hell and keep spreading across the battlefield.

They made it through that hellscape?! Our men can't even get close!

I-it's all over.

There's no way we can win.

The thought that we'll all die in vain rattles around my head.

"I-I'll take the rear! Everyone! Run for it!"

As I stare in shock at the oncoming swarm of Nightmare's Vestiges, a voice calls out from the front lines.

It's Kogou.

"…! All units, retreat! Quickly!"

Kogou's shout brings me back to my senses, and I call out an order.

The swarm of Nightmare's Vestiges is still far away.

We can still get away if we move now!

"Hurry!"

I shout for the soldiers to retreat faster.

Then I see one group stepping forward in the opposite direction.

"Kogou!"

It's Kogou's squadron.

"Mr. Balto! The rest is up to you!"

"Kogou! Rrgh…!"

I swallow the urge to tell him to run and remain focused on evacuating the troops.

Kogou is a simple-minded man who worked his way up the ranks with nothing but sheer physical strength.

And yet he was always timorous and balked at the idea of fighting.

But that fainthearted man joined this battle of his own free will, and now, he's volunteering to bring up the rear, knowing that he likely won't make it out alive.

I must not let such resolution go to waste.

From far behind me, I can hear the sounds of battle.

And screams of death as well.

Even so, I cannot turn back.

"Retreat! Run for it!"

I keep raising my voice to spur the soldiers on, trying to get as many people out of here alive as I possibly can.

I'd like to ask you a question, Demon Lord.

Do you still see us as disposable, even as we fight so desperately?

Must we all die for your goals?

Would you truly say that demonkind's days of atonement were all in vain?

Tell me.

"Damn it all!"

I'm not sure who shouted that curse.

Perhaps it even came from me.

MEAN KOGOU

Born to a commoner family, he was promoted and became a noble, taking the last name Mean. Though he was a common soldier at first, he distinguished himself with his raw physical strength and worked his way up to the rank of commander. Since his brute strength was his best merit, he was not very good at strategizing or giving orders. Most often, he fought on the front lines and left the direction to more capable subordinates. As a result, he created a simple and effective work environment, and this combined with his honest if unsophisticated personality made him quite popular with his men; however, he also had more than a few shortcomings, such as being easily swayed by others. As such, his strengths and weaknesses were very clearly defined.

Sophia

“Looks like the queen’s started fighting.”

Miss Ariel murmurs quietly.

We’re in the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

There’s certainly no way to see whether the queen is fighting from here.

Maybe she’s using Panoptic Vision to check on the battlefield?

Miss Ariel has been weakened considerably since that last battle, enough that it’s even having a detrimental effect on her everyday life. Should she really be using a skill like that?

Well, I suppose she wouldn’t use it if it wasn’t safe.

I am a little worried, but I don’t have much of a choice but to trust Miss Ariel to know what’s best for herself, I’m sure.

Now then, perhaps I ought to use Panoptic Vision myself to check on the situation outside.

This skill allows me to see quite a long way, even in spite of the considerable distance between the Bottom Stratum and the outside.

Sure enough, the first thing I see is the queen fighting fiercely near the entrance to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Her opponents are a leopard-like monster and a red dragon.

Both of them are probably ancient dragons.

I mean, the leopard is controlling lightning, while the other is breathing fire.

A lightning dragon and a fire dragon, perhaps?

While the queen fights those two beasts, a humanoid army is stationed nearby.

Or rather, two separate armies: One is the demon army.

I even see a few faces I recognize.

Which means the other must be a human army.

The rest of the spider swarm is fast approaching the humanoids.

They'll collide any moment now.

"Should we call the other queen here, too?"

Looking away from that battlefield for the moment, I check in on the other entrance as I speak.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth is a massive dungeon that connects two continents.

In other words, there's an entrance on each landmass.

And while one of the entrances is entrenched in all-out war, the other is perfectly peaceful.

At least, as peaceful as anyplace can be when it's being guarded by another queen taratect and her army of spiders.

Since it looks like the humanoids have decided to focus all their forces on attacking one side, I thought I'd suggest that we summon the queen from the entrance that's not under siege.

"Nah," Ariel answers immediately. "I'll keep an eye on things for now and summon her when the time is right."

Summon, she says…

"Are you sure about that?"

"As sure as I can be, anyway."

Won't summoning be much harder on her constitution than Panoptic Vision?

But just as I expected, Miss Ariel only brushes off my concerns.

She looked pained enough after the first time, though…

Miss Ariel had to summon the queens to each entrance of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, of course.

Though we were at least able to use that spaceship to get to the entrances, Miss Ariel was clearly exhausted after the summonings.

I suppose it was worth the effort, but still…

"Summoning certainly is convenient."

"Oh, right. You can summon your dear Merazophis, too."

Being able to instantly call backup to your side is a serious asset in battle.

I'd hate to be the poor sap fighting someone when a legendary-class monster suddenly pops into the mix.

And the queen brings more than just her own strength, too.

"It seems almost like cheating that your summoned subordinate can summon *her* subordinates, doesn't it?"

"Eh, I guess."

The queen has a lot of subordinates of her own.

Just by summoning a single queen, you essentially get an entire

spider army thrown in for free.

It's a little unfair that she's strong both individually and in a group, isn't it?

"Well, as far as foul play goes, I'd say being a vampire is even cheaper than little old me. Your subordinates can multiply like rabbits if you feel so inclined."

Touché, I say.

Being a vampire, I can suck an opponent's blood and turn them into a vampire, too.

Then, with the Kin Control skill, I can control them as my servants.

And *then* I can use that freshly made vampire to attack someone else and create yet another vampire.

Those vampires can attack other vampires, and so on and so forth, allowing me to make as many vampires as I so choose.

The scariest part about that is that I can force our enemies to join our side, I suppose.

Not that I would do any such thing.

"You realize you could do that anytime you want, right?"

"No, thank you. Merazophis is the only servant I need."

I'm not going to turn any old riffraff into my vampiric spawn.

Being my servant is a position with special meaning, and I insist upon keeping it that way.

My enhanced hearing picks up on a muttered comment from Ariel: "She forgot about Wald. Poor guy."

…I didn't forget about him!

I was just, you know! Counting him in a different category, that's all!

"Hrm. At any rate, it looks like the queen is fighting Fire Dragon Nguyen and Lightning Dragon Gohka…"

My guesses about the ancient dragons fighting the queen were right: The one in dragon form is a fire dragon called Nguyen, and the leopard-looking one is a lightning dragon called Gohka.

"…Two ancient dragons might be a little too much for her."

Just as Ariel says, the queen is starting to lose.

Even a legendary-class monster like her evidently struggles against a fellow legendary-class, let alone two ancient dragons at the same time.

But apparently that isn't Miss Ariel's only concern.

"Where are the other ancient dragons?"

Two ancient dragons are fighting the queen.

But there are supposed to be four others: Water Dragon Iena, Wind Dragon Hyuvan, Ice Dragon Nia, and Dark Dragon Reise.

It just so happens that I've even met Hyuvan and Nia myself.

Although it's not as if we had much of a conversation—we just briefly introduced ourselves in the middle of other recent happenings.

I'm told they were technically enrolled as members of the Ninth Demon Army, of which their boss Black was the commander. Still, they each have their own territories to control, and I've been busy with business of my own. We never ran into each other before all this started.

Really, if we were going to end up on enemy sides like this, perhaps it's better that we weren't friends in the first place.

Knowing each other better might only have made it harder for all of us.

"Could they be in the labyrinth already, by any chance?"

"I can't say for sure, but I certainly haven't heard anything to suggest it."

Miss Ariel's spider monster spawn has already spread throughout the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

If anything happened, they would report to Miss Ariel right away.

The lack of reports thus far would suggest that nothing unusual has happened inside the labyrinth, at least not yet.

"But yeah, something feels off for sure…"

The missing ancient dragons.

The silence in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Normally, we should be celebrating that, but just as Miss Ariel says, it seems a little too convenient to be true.

It's as if something has gone amiss just out of sight…

"What's that? Huh? Water?"

At that exact moment, Miss Ariel suddenly turns tense and starts muttering something.

Right on cue, I suppose.

It looks like she's getting a report from some of her spawn.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm not sure what exactly…but something's definitely up."

I guess the report wasn't too clear on the details.

Most of her spawn aren't terribly intelligent to begin with, so a

lot of their reports tend to be a bit short and to the point.

But still…"water"? What's that supposed to mean?

"Ah!"

Just as I'm contemplating this mystery, Ariel lets out a short cry.

"Wh-what the hell does she think she's doing?!"

Then it crescendos into a bellow.

"Flooding us? Are you kidding me?!

…Come again?

"Oh, *yikes*…"

When I raced to the Upper Stratum, I found it half submerged underwater.

I used a pit that connects from the Lower Stratum to the Upper Stratum to get here, although it was really more of a waterfall, thanks to the water flowing into it from above.

That made for a lovely sight and all, not that now is a good time to be admiring the view.

As for why all this is happening, it would appear that a certain someone decided to bust a hole in the ceiling of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

This labyrinth happens to be underneath the ocean.

Which means that if you make a hole in the ceiling of the Upper Stratum, seawater will flood right in.

The ceiling is incredibly thick and sturdy for that exact reason, but I guess it's not so tough that, say, an ancient dragon couldn't break through.

Honestly! What a ridiculous trick to pull on us!

What sane person would ever think to try and flood the biggest labyrinth in the world?!

Not me, I can tell you that much!

As it happens, flooding labyrinths is actually not that unusual of a concept.

I learned about it in the demon academy.

It's a very effective strategy against an airtight underground labyrinth with no other exits, or so we were told.

The existence of Water Magic makes flooding a place much easier than it would be on Earth, and it would definitely be enough to take out any enemy who can't swim.

Since labyrinths are generally monster-infested caverns, the aim

of flooding one is usually to exterminate all the monsters inside.

The main drawback is that since the labyrinth will then be submerged, you won't be able to go in and out anymore, nor would you be able to collect the monster corpses, I suppose.

But if your goal is simply to destroy all the monsters within, flooding might be the most effective method around.

Of course, if you're really going to flood the place, you'd need a massive amount of water.

Just using Water Magic alone would require way too much MP to produce enough of it.

That means you'd have to physically have water on hand. Which only really works if, for instance, you can make a hole directly under the ocean, as this current situation nicely demonstrates.

So it's not impossible. But the main reason Miss Ariel and the rest of us didn't consider the possibility is because of our enemy's goal.

Their entire aim is to get at the door to the core of the system, found deep in the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth here.

That means you physically have to go there, right?

And yet you're going to submerge it underwater?

Um, hello? How stupid can you get?

It doesn't seem like the act of any sane person, that's for sure.

But I guess they probably figured they had to do something crazy to have a shot at victory.

I'm not sure whether our enemies know that Miss Ariel is in a weakened state, but even if they do, we've still got plenty of power to be reckoned with.

There's the massive swarm of spider monsters, including the queen.

Then the puppet taratects: Ael, Sael, Riel, and Fiel.

And then there's Kyouya, Merazophis, and yours truly.

That's already enough to be a match for a thousand men or more, possibly past the point of being threatened by anything less than an ancient dragon.

On top of that, Phelmina and the Tenth Army seem to be operating independently outside the Great Elroe Labyrinth, too.

And then there's the free-roaming monsters inside the labyrinth.

While most of them are neither enemies nor allies, the white

spiderlike monsters known as the Nightmare's Vestiges appear to be on our side.

White spider monsters…

They've got to be connected to Master, right?

…Well, it doesn't really matter, as long as they're going to fight for us.

We'd be here all day if I tried to question everything Master does anyway.

Honestly! When did she even have time to create such a freakishly powerful army?!

Ah, that wasn't me questioning her, okay? It was, you know, rhetorical. Not a question, I swear…

At any rate, even the Nightmare's Vestiges might have trouble with this flooding situation.

As much as I was hoping we could let them take care of just about everything, this attack and the enemy behind it might require some bigger guns.

I had better hurry, then.

I set one foot on the surface of the water.

Immediately, the area of water my foot touches freezes over.

I'm using my Freezing Attack skill to put a layer of ice over anything I touch.

The "Attack" series of skills, which apply a particular property to an attack, have power relative to the stats of the user.

With my impressively high stats, it's so strong that it becomes the ability to freeze anything I touch instantaneously.

I keep running across the surface of the water, leaving a frozen path in my wake.

Freezing all the water surging inward, I prevent any further flooding.

Even I can't freeze all the water that's already filled up inside, of course.

But if I start freezing anything in sight, I can at least hold back the flooding somewhat.

Then I've just got to stop the flow of water at its source!

And in order to do that, I'll have to go ahead and beat up the culprit!

Before long, I catch sight of a mermaid fighting off some Nightmare's Vestiges.

She's controlling the flow of water at will, using it to take out

the spider monsters one after another.

A Nightmare's Vestige gets engulfed in a sphere of water, then its body bursts.

Mermaids sure use nasty tricks for being so pretty and innocent-looking.

I'm guessing she's flooding water into their bodies and forcing it outward to destroy them from the inside out.

If I remember right, most living things' bodies are mainly composed of water. By forcing water of her own into any available orifice, she must be able to rupture their innards and make them explode.

That definitely seems like an unfair ability in this half-submerged battlefield.

The last thing I want is to go head-to-head against someone with such dangerous moves.

So I'll finish her off in one go!

I close in on her from behind and swing my broadsword down on her neck!

But she dodges the blade by twisting out of the way without even turning around, then shoots water right back at me.

I freeze it in midair.

"Humph!"

"Hmph!"

The mermaid and I both huff in perfect harmony.

At the same time, I freeze the water around us, and close up the hole in the ceiling with ice.

The massive amount of water flowing in through the hole turns into an icicle.

That should stop any more water from getting in right away.

The shock waves freeze the rest of the water in the area, too.

The mermaid hurriedly leaps out of the water before she gets frozen in place, transforming her fish tail into normal human legs.

Um, excuse me, don't you have any decency?!

No, wait, she's got clothes on.

Even if it's nothing but a skimpy swimsuit.

She's fast not just at transforming, but also at changing into clothes.

The mermaid-turned-swimsuit-model floats in the air, carefully avoiding the ice.

"Not bad. I was hoping that would finish you off."

“Oh dear, you really thought you could defeat me that easily? How embarrassing for you.”

We exchange casual taunts as we assess each other.

Noticing the woman glancing over at the Nightmare’s Vestiges, I use Appraisal to distract her.

Appraisal causes discomfort for the target, making it handy for situations like these.

The spiders scatter away while she’s busy grimacing at the sensation.

Looks like they’re escaping from the sunken Upper Stratum and heading outside.

Probably for the best, since it wouldn’t do them much good to stay in this half-submerged, half-frozen cavern.

Now, let’s have a look at those Appraisal results.

Water Dragon Iena? Ugh, of course…

Just as I suspected, this is the ancient dragon chief of the water dragons.

She’s the most troublesome of all the ancient dragons, according to Miss Ariel.

Just a glance at her stats is enough to explain that assessment.

All of them are over 25,000.

Come on, she’s even stronger than the queens!

I’ve certainly fought my share of legendary-class monsters, but this is my first time facing one as strong as this.

I guess she’s known as the strongest ancient dragon for good reason.

…Not that I’m worried about losing, of course.

Between all the legendary-class monsters I’ve beaten around the world, Master’s grueling training, and all the other nonsense I’ve been through, my stats are even higher than Water Dragon Iena’s.

As long as I don’t let my guard down, I can handle her just fine.

In which case…

“Let’s make this quick, shall we?!”

“Oh, don’t be like that. Won’t you dance with me awhile?”

I’ll just take her out with a quick attack!

My ice-imbued broadsword swings toward her.

True to her word, Water Dragon Iena whirls out of the way with dance-like smoothness.

As she spins around, water gushes out of both her hands, attacking me in the ever-shifting shapes of dozens of serpents.

This isn’t a magic show, lady!

“Come now, dear girl! Let us dance forever and ever!”

“Oh, stop being so saucy!”

The combination of Iena’s dance-like movements and the mystical whirling of the water make for quite a spectacle, I’ll admit.

But I don’t have time to stand around and watch the show!

I knock back the pillars of water with my sword.

Immediately, the water freezes and shatters.

Normally, it would be impossible to cut a liquid with a sword. I’m sure she would either surround me with it and drown me, or fill my body with water and destroy me from the inside.

Unfortunately for her, our type of matchup works out in my favor.

I can easily freeze her water and render it useless.

I’ve got the advantage in both stats and typing. She doesn’t stand a chance!

Too bad, so sad!

Water Dragon Iena seems to sense this, too; there’s a hint of panic on her face.

She keeps sending waves of water toward me; I knock them all away, freezing and smashing with my sword as I press onward.

But every time I move forward, Iena moves back, preventing me from getting any closer.

I’d like to close the distance all at once, but the water attacks are preventing me from doing that.

Argh! Now you’re getting on my nerves!

“Did you know, my dear? Water dragons rule over all the vast ocean.”

As I get more and more annoyed, Iena starts blabbering at me.

“So? Why should I care?!”

I freeze the entire cascade of water and crash right through it.

Each kind of dragon rules over and protects a particular territory.

Water dragons are in charge of the ocean.

On the other side of the ocean is an expanse where the ground crumbles away. The water dragons sink any ships that venture onto the ocean so that humanity doesn't reach it by mistake.

"Because of its size, we need plenty of eyes to keep watch."

Again, who cares?

Iena's expression hasn't changed.

It's still fairly calm, with only a hint of stress.

Wait…still calm?

Even though she's clearly losing?

"In other words, of all the dragons, water dragons are by far the most numerous."

Just as I start to get a very bad feeling about where this speech is headed, a huge tremor shakes the cavern.

"Naturally, that means we have the most ancient dragons, too, hmm?"

A tremor like a massive explosion has happened nearby…

Activating my Panoptic Vision with growing dread, I find several different areas of the labyrinth where huge holes have opened in the ceiling, massive amounts of water flooding inside.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"I wonder, little girl, can you handle all thirty-seven ancient water dragons by yourself?"

Sure enough, aside from Water Dragon Iena, thirty-seven other legendary-class monsters were trying to flood the labyrinth, too.

Kusama

Aww, man.

Why did things have to turn out like this?

To be totally honest, the fate of the world and all that junk feels a liiittle over-the-top. Like, I kinda wish they'd just figure stuff out without dragging us into it.

Then again, I guess we've been dragged into it from the moment we got reincarnated into this world. So maybe this is par for the course…

Especially when you're a reincarnation who's born into working for the Word of God religion.

My dad was kind of a big deal in the black ops of the church, it turns out.

For better or worse, that means they figured out I'm a reincarnation when I was still a baby, and the ol' pontiff took me under his wing real quick after that.

I can't tell you how many times I've complained about being forced to do special agent training because of that.

Their training sucks, dammit!

But after hearing what some of the other reincarnations went through, I guess maybe I should be grateful that I didn't have it worse.

If I hadn't been under the church's protection, the elves woulda captured me, right?

Hard pass.

"So yeah, I do owe the old man for all that. And I really don't wanna get mixed up in this fate of the world biz, but I figure I can't just take off without repaying him and stuff, y'know?"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, totally. So I kinda can't let you go after him, you feel

me?"

"Well then, I'll just have to get past you by force."

With that, the chick in the white robes tosses a round blade thingy—it's called a chakram, I think?—right at my face.

Man, why's it gotta be like this?

Okay, I guess I already know it's 'cause the old man picked a fight with Wakaba's side.

That's why I'm out here attacking her henchmen.

It's great that they gave me a ride in this huge UFO-looking thing from the elf village to the continent of Daztrudia or whatever, right?

But then, just while I was trying to figure out what to do next, some familiar faces from the black ops call out to me, and of course I'm gonna follow 'em.

Especially 'cause my fellow reincarnations are all sooo mean to me.

I mean, I guess since I wasn't stuck in the elf village, I'm already not part of their little group, which I get and all. But it's a total bummer when peeps I was kinda close with in our old lives start treating me like a stranger, y'know?

So can you really blame me for feeling so awkward that I dipped out and sided with the black ops instead?

Then, next thing you know, they're getting a whole army together to attack the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

And now these white-robed guys are coming after the pontiff's makeshift headquarters bringing up the rear of our little army, basically.

I dodge the chakram flying toward me.

I might not look it, but I did train to be a secret agent, and I've got a reincarnation's signature Cheat skill to boot.

I'm pretty confident that I won't lose to your average rando, even if my secret skill is not as impressive as the ones people like Wakaba and Kyou got.

The problem is that my current opponents aren't just randos.

They're Wakaba's personal subordinates, the Tenth Demon Army.

Elite demons handpicked and trained by Wakaba herself.

Aka a buncha freaks who wear matching white robes.

They're probably attacking our HQ because they know the old man, the Word of God pontiff, is inside.

Isn't Wakaba's side on the defensive?

How come they're invading us like this, then?

The whole reason I volunteered to guard the headquarters is 'cause I didn't wanna get into the big fateful battle at the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Dammit, I bet the old man knew this would happen, too, didn't he?

No wonder he was so quick to allow me to stay here as a guard.

It was so easy, I knew he musta had some reason, and now here it is.

Most of our forces are well on their way to the labyrinth already.

The only people here at the headquarters are basically some bigwigs from a bunch of nations who won't go out on the front lines, and their guards.

And then the others who stayed behind, like me.

That group also includes a decent chunk of the black ops squad, such as my father.

Now the black ops agents and the bigwigs' guards are working together to fight the white-robed invaders.

As for how it's going, I'd rather you didn't ask…

Yeah, there's no way we can win this one.

Each of the white-robes is just too damn strong.

The secret agents of the Word of God are elite fighters, fiercely trained from a tender age.

And the white-robes are an even match with those elites, if not stronger.

On top of that, they totally outnumber us.

We might be able to handle them one-on-one, but since they've also got more guys, we're basically screwed.

Plus the bigwigs' guards fighting with us aren't much help. Even the ones that are decently strong still have to worry about protecting their employers first…

I mean, they're doing their best. But it's still only a matter of time.

Ha-ha. Guess this is what they call fighting a losing battle, huh?

…Nah, I know this is no joke.

Time for me to use my super-cheat ability to turn things around!

Yeah, if only it were that easy…

But the chick I'm fighting, who seems to be the white-robes' leader, is too damn strong.

The chakram crashes into the shuriken I threw to counter it.

At the same time, I try to close in and attack with my ninja sword, only to be blocked by the chakram she's got on her arm.

Even when I use a fire jutsu to shoot flames out of my mouth, she cancels it out with some kind of Dark Magic.

So far, it seems like we're just about on the same level of strength.

Ouch, my pride.

I mean, seriously, I've been through all kinds of extra training since I was a baby, on account of being a reincarnation.

I figured I was decently strong, even if I can't compete with folks like Wakaba and Kyou, who've been fighting for survival and getting stronger their whole lives.

Guess it's true what they say about pride and a fall and all that.

"You are a reincarnation. If you tell us where the pontiff is, we won't hurt you."

The chick keeps a close eye on me as she talks.

She and I are pretty evenly matched.

If we really go at it, there's no telling who would win.

Not to mention, there's no guarantee the winner would come out on the other side unharmed, never mind the loser.

Their side has the upper hand.

If we take too long, I bet their backup will arrive, too.

So she doesn't really need to push it too much.

That's probably why she's being more cautious than necessary —she knows they're gonna win as long as she doesn't royally screw up.

From her point of view, it makes sense for us to surrender.

"Yeah, I'd really love to take you up on that, buuut…"

I glance to the side.

Not far away, my dad is fighting off three white-robes at once.

Before the battle started, he told me this:

"If you want to run away, that's fine."

After all, the old man isn't even here.

Sorry, white-robes, but you're wasting your time.

But by stalling them here, we can keep Wakaba's forces spread thin.

The more we buy time, the longer it'll take for them to get back

to the front lines.

Then again, just keeping them distracted is good enough to buy time, even if we don't slow them down much.

So we don't need to put our lives on the line in this fight.

I know all that, except…

"I dunno, I figure I gotta at least fight hard enough to make up for what they've done for me, or I'm gonna look super uncool."

I can't turn my back and run while my father is fighting for all he's worth.

And the Word of God religion has kept me fed all this time, y'know?

"Go easy on me, okay, lady?"

"I see. Then I'll try to make your death quick and painless."

"How is that 'going easy'?!"

Aww, man.

Why's it gotta be like this…?

Phelmina

If I truly cared for demonkind, I ought to side with the ebony god, no doubt.

As a noble, I should put my land and my people first.

That is what I have been taught all my life, having grown up in a particularly important and strict noble family.

I believe that I have lived by those words all this time.

Yes, even after being disowned by my family, taken in by the Tenth Army, and following a path that's a far cry from nobility.

If all went according to plan, I would have married my former fiancé Wald and tended to our family's needs as his wife.

How did things go so wrong that I've become a highly trained assassin instead?

It wasn't my fault, or at least I don't think I made any major mistakes…

In the end, it all comes back to Sophia's doing.

It's because she seduced Wald away from me that I was driven out of my family under false accusations.

And because Sophia had ties to the Demon Lord, she laid the groundwork for most other noble families to treat me as an outcast of their own accord, too.

Yes, I know, the person who ruined my life most directly was Wald.

But still! I believe Sophia is the one who caused all of it.

How I despise that woman.

Ahem…

Perhaps my personal resentment was intermingled in this explanation, but even after all that, I nevertheless continued to live with noble pride and work for the sake of demonkind.

I chose to join the Tenth Army because I felt it would ultimately

be for the greater good of my people.

No matter what I did, I knew I could never outmaneuver Tenth Army Commander White or Demon Lord Ariel.

Yes, at first I saw Lady White and the Demon Lord as enemies.

Though it was Wald who planted the seeds that resulted in my being disowned, that was all possible because of Sophia's connections with the Demon Lord.

The nobles all took pains to exclude me purely because I was in opposition to someone with ties to the greatly feared Demon Lord.

Wald was just an indirect accomplice.

Of course, I know it is foolish to despise the Demon Lord for this, as it had nothing to do with her directly.

But surely you cannot blame me for being left with a poor impression of her?

I was grateful that the Tenth Army took me in after my disownment, of course.

Even so, that only happened because my father begged Lady White on bended knee.

Despise being forced to disown me under immense pressure from our noble family, my father still found a way to save me somehow.

Which is why I was able to go on without losing my pride as a noble, just as my father taught me.

And yet…

The reformed Tenth Army handles the Demon Army's darkest, most secret missions.

This isn't an official rule, but since our leader Lady White is always pulling strings behind the scenes all over the world, she often assigns us jobs like assassination and information-gathering.

By being a part of all this, one ends up learning about the dark side of this world, whether one wants to or not.

The more I learned, the more I was driven into despair.

I thought that being born into a high-ranking noble family meant that I was superior, that I knew more than most people, yet that delusion soon fell apart around me.

Soon I realized that everything I knew was just a sliver of reality as seen from a demon's perspective, specifically a noble demon family's.

The knowledge I thought I had about the world only pertained to a tiny part of it.

But even as I learned all this, I continued working for the sake of demonkind.

At least…I believe I did so to the best of my ability.

"But that's all over now. Forgive me, Father…"

I murmur an apology to my father.

I know that he, too, has worked hard as a high-ranking noble for the sake of demonkind.

And of course I am grateful to him for bringing me into this world and raising me.

Yet here I am, essentially betraying demonkind instead of repaying him.

But I have made up my mind to work for the ivory god.

To sacrifice over half of humanity, and demonkind along with it.

Despite knowing full well that the correct choice for the betterment of all demons would be to join the ebony god's side.

After Lady Ariel's briefing, I gathered the Tenth Army and addressed them.

"The ebony god's forces are sure to attack the Great Elroe Labyrinth. And the Word of God pontiff should be with them. If we can eliminate him, since he has ruler authority, it would bring the ivory god's side that much closer to victory. Which is why I will be targeting the pontiff. I won't force you to come along. Anyone who wants to join me, please do so now."

Siding with the ivory god would mean betraying demonkind.

With that in mind, I wasn't going to force anyone to go along with my plan.

But much to my surprise, when I declared my intentions, not a single person left.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Commander White took us in when the rest of the world abandoned us. We would gladly lay down our lives to serve her."

The Tenth Army is an assortment of oddballs, none of whom are on the up-and-up by any stretch of the imagination.

It was originally an empty title with no real members at all.

While the other armies were restructured under Lady Ariel's iron-fisted authority, she sent members of the Tenth to lower-numbered armies, until all that was left of the Tenth Army were those whom none of the other commanders wanted.

Soldiers who were demoted due to poor behavior.

Scrawny volunteers who joined the army in hopes of being fed.

But Lady White didn't turn up her nose at this band of misfits.

She disciplined those with poor conduct and reformed their behavior.

She fed those who were malnourished.

Then she put all of us through the training from hell.

…Yes, I know, it's because of that hellish training that the Tenth Army came together as one.

The timid and the overconfident alike were subjected to the same horrible experiences, until we understood to the marrow of our bones how insignificant we all were.

We didn't even have the energy left to resent being put through hell.

But while she trained us mercilessly beyond belief, she never gave up on any of us.

She persisted in training us until every last member of the Tenth Army could be called an elite fighter.

…Even if one member begged her to "just kill us instead!" somewhere along the line.

It goes without saying, I'm sure, that the member in question was subjected to an even more hellish training as punishment.

Though the rest of us were forced to do the same as an exercise in collective responsibility!

Ahem.

Well, in spite of all that suffering, it's surprisingly hard to hate Lady White.

She doesn't talk, she's always expressionless, and you can never tell what she's thinking.

But if someone's in trouble, she'll come to the rescue without a second thought.

Even though she isn't interested in other people…or no, perhaps it's *because* of that…she casually does things that change the course of a person's life completely.

For better or for worse.

There are certainly some whose lives have been ruined because of Lady White.

But she's also the only person who accepted the Tenth Army, refusing to cast us aside when everyone else had long since forgotten us.

When we were in the midst of that hellish training, we kept remembering how she'd offered us a lifeline in our darkest hour.

Even though she was the one causing our new darkest hours, too.

It's a catch-22, I know.

But I still can't find it in me to begrudge her for it.

Besides the fact that she saved us, I've also seen Lady White work herself to the bone for the sake of Lady Ariel.

It's hard to hate someone who's so determined to help someone else.

Seeing her like that moved me.

I always thought it was my duty as a noble to work for demonkind.

But when I think about it more carefully, it was other nobles who cast me out of society.

So why shouldn't I make decisions based on my own feelings, rather than on some obligation?

Rather than from any duty to demonkind, I want to be of use to someone who's trying to take on the entire world for one single person's sake.

"*Hff! Hff!* Will you…tell me…*hff*…where…the pontiff is…now?"

And now, I'm cornering one of the reincarnations and interrogating him.

The reincarnation known as Shinobu Kusama is sprawled on his back, gasping for breath like I am.

We're both covered in wounds, panting, and sweating.

This is the first time I've gotten so worn-out in a battle since joining the Tenth Army.

I suppose I should have expected no less from a reincarnation.

Since he didn't seem too enthusiastic about fighting, I thought he'd make a break for it after a while. Instead, he's given me quite a run for my money…

"Ooh. Kinda sexy to see a chick dripping with sweat like that."

"Shall I just kill you right now?"

How can he say such idiotic things when he doesn't even have the strength to stand anymore?

Or perhaps he's so exhausted that he's just blurting out whatever comes into his head?

“Nahh. Look, I’m sorry, but I dunno where the old man is.”

“You’re lying.”

Out of all the reincarnations, Kusama is closest to the pontiff, almost a right-hand man.

Surely he wouldn’t be in the dark about the pontiff’s location.

But he just grins weakly and says it again.

“C’mon, it’s true. A ninja doesn’t lie.”

…Whether he’s lying or not, he’s clearly not going to talk.

“Let’s withdraw.”

“…Are you sure?”

I gather the Tenth Army and order a retreat.

“Yes. Clearly, he won’t talk even if we torture him. It might even be true that he doesn’t know. Either way, we’d just be wasting our time. We’ve crushed the enemy headquarters. We’ll just have to count that as a victory.”

I’m sure the question “Are you sure?” was also asking whether I should really let him live.

Kusama is fairly powerful, even for a reincarnation. If he gets his wounds treated with Healing Magic and returns to the battlefield, he’ll be a serious obstacle to contend with.

Obviously, the smartest move would be to kill him while I have the chance.

And yet.

It feels wrong to me to kill a reincarnation who was dragged into this world’s problems through no fault of his own.

“We’re going to track down the pontiff.”

I redirect my attention.

Lady White is still fighting.

All we can do is keep fighting, too.

“Let’s go, Tenth Army.”

Merazophis

This world is deeply unfair.

Differences in stats, skills, and indeed racial and social standing are clearly defined.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for the weak to overcome the strong.

Few can challenge an exceptionally powerful being and live to tell the tale.

The battle now unfolds before the entrance to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Here, the most exceptionally powerful beings are the queen taratect and the two ancient dragons doing battle against her.

The three of them were locked in a fierce battle for some time, but now that has ended in the queen's defeat.

Even a queen taratect could not survive an onslaught from two ancient dragons.

But the two dragons must have exhausted much of their strength as well: They quickly turned tail and fled after the fight was over.

Thus, no slaughter took place on the battlefield this day.

Had the two ancient dragons stayed behind and set about taking out the rest of our forces, we would have incurred massive losses.

It is a most fortunate boon they did not do so.

Wresting victory away from an especially powerful being is nigh impossible.

Not even an advantage in numbers can change that fact.

Virtually no amount of fighters with stats averaging around a thousand can take on an opponent whose stats are ten times as high, no matter how many of the former there might be.

Our soldiers would have fallen like flies.

When a being that strong exists on the battlefield, the key to victory is how to neutralize it.

But if it's too powerful to be neutralized, often there is no path to victory at all.

There are no longer any individuals on this battlefield who fall into that category.

However, there is still a distinct difference in the strength of each side and each soldier.

In this case, the problem becomes how best to suppress the enemies with the highest battle capabilities.

This tends to lead to the strongest fighters on either side fighting one another.

After all, sending the weak to fight the strong only results in their dying on the spot without dealing any significant damage.

Even so, one cannot discount the strength found in numbers.

Perhaps a single individual would deal very little damage, but if you repeat that with tens or even hundreds more soldiers, the amount of accumulated damage is not to be disdained.

They have already turned the tables on us in terms of numbers.

Where there were once enough taratects to blot out the entire battlefield, most have now become corpses.

The only ones that remain are the stronger individuals like greater and arch taratects.

Even those seem to be gradually losing to the enemy's sheer numbers.

Humans surround the greater taratects and slowly but surely whittle away at their health.

The stronger humans and demons are working together, albeit clumsily, to take down the arch taratects.

I recognize a few faces among them.

Sir Balto aside, I was perhaps a little surprised to see the likes of Lady Sanatoria and Sir Kogou joining the fight.

We once stood side by side as fellow commanders of the demon army, yet now we are squaring off as enemies.

I am not without my own feelings about this, of course.

But I vowed that I would follow my young mistress for all eternity.

I cannot show mercy to anyone, not even a former comrade.

Still, while I might have known this in theory, I cannot help but

feel a twinge of emotion.

It was fortunate that the Nightmare's Vestiges forced the demon army to retreat so that I did not have to stain my hands with the blood of past acquaintances.

The human army is still staying behind to fight, but the tides of battle have turned in our favor once again.

With their overwhelming numbers and individual strength, the Nightmare's Vestiges are easily dominating the human army.

No doubt it is only a matter of time until they retreat like the demon army.

…Though there are a few who seem to be stubbornly staying put.

"At this point, it's basically a tradition for us to face off against you like this, huh?"

"So it would seem."

Two reincarnations face me, a young man and a young woman.

Kunihiko Tagawa and Asaka Kushitani.

I have met them several times now.

The first time was when I destroyed their tribe's settlement.

They were still young then, and I let them live because they were reincarnations.

The second time was in a previous major battle.

I crossed swords with them and witnessed their growth.

And we crossed swords again in the battle of the elf village, albeit through a shadow copy of mine.

By now, you could say that we are bound by fate.

Based on the strength of the two armies currently remaining, I imagine they could not ignore my existence on this side.

I do not say this out of conceit, but I am most likely the strongest fighter of either side currently remaining on this battlefield.

And so these two reincarnations have come to stop me.

"I thought about it a lot, really went back and forth about things. But in the end, I decided I've still gotta fight you."

"…I see."

I told them the truth at the elf village.

I'm sure they had many conflicting feelings about it.

And it seems they have chosen to fight.

"I cannot hold back."

I must give them fair warning.

Until now, I have taken care not to kill them because they are reincarnations.

But this time, in this battle, I must put that aside.

Most of the reincarnations knew nothing of this world that they had been dragged into.

Yet this is no longer the case.

If they have chosen to fight with full knowledge of the circumstances, there is no longer any need to hold back.

And I have never been so skillful as to be able to carefully hold back my strength.

If we are to fight, I will aim to kill.

"Good, because I w—"

Kunihiko's bold declaration suddenly cuts off mid-sentence.

His body slowly slumps forward.

"Sorry, Kunihiko."

Behind him, Asaka apologizes quietly for knocking him out.

"…What is the meaning of this?"

"We surrender," Asaka answers quite calmly. "I'm not ready to die yet, and I don't want Kunihiko to die, either."

She turns and walks away, carrying the unconscious Kunihiko.

Openly fleeing in front of the enemy.

For a moment, I am dumbfounded.

But Asaka's decision is probably the right one.

I bear no personal grudge toward these two.

They likely bear one against me; still, I never particularly wished to kill them.

Asaka must realize that, and is therefore unafraid to turn her back on me and flee unguarded.

If we did fight, I would undoubtedly kill them.

As I said, I am not skillful enough to control my strength with enough precision to spare their lives.

When I fight, I aim to kill with certainty.

Given the difference between my stats and theirs, the fight would likely have been over in a matter of seconds.

I would kill them on the spot.

Thus, surrendering before the battle begins is the right choice.

It would have been wiser not to come at all, but judging by Kunihiko's behavior, I doubt that was an option.

I watch over Asaka as she walks away.

For my part, I believe choosing not to fight is admirable, too.

Though it is not my place to say this as the person who destroyed their hometown, I sincerely hope that happiness awaits them in the future.

Kunihiko

After the Demon Lord's explanation, I got lost in thought.

Seriously, there was way too much to think about.

Like how the Demon Lord was just a little girl smaller than any of us.

And what I'm supposed to do now that my favorite sword is broken.

And how we're even supposed to do anything about the fate of the world.

And what about settling things with Merazophis?

My tiny brain did its best to think all this over.

It might be the hardest I've ever thought about anything, even in my previous life.

Mostly because I'm not that smart.

Usually, I figure there's no point in thinking about anything, so I just act instead.

I've gotten by well enough so far, and Asaka always manages to bail me out if I screw up too majorly.

Guess it's thanks to Asaka manning the brakes that I've been able to charge full speed ahead all the time, huh?

But this time, even I had to give things some serious thought.

I feel like I thought for so long that I started thinking about weird stuff…that's just part of this whole thinking thing, right?

Wait, huh? Thinking about thoughts leads to other kinds of thoughts?

…Okay, I give up.

If I keep thinking, my head is gonna explode.

Since I couldn't get my head on straight, I was looking up at the sky when it hit me.

It sure would suck if half of humanity died.

By then, I'd made up my mind.

All right! I'm gonna fight for the ebony god's side!

Yeah, I know it's not very smart to spend ages thinking about something only to decide on a random impulse.

But those impulses show how you really feel.

I've gotten kinda attached to this world after living in it for over a decade.

Of course, that means I've met all kinds of people, and lost my fair share of 'em, too.

Working as an adventurer, I even saw people die.

It was saddening every time, and I often wished we'd spent more time together.

And if Wakaba's method means half of all my still-living friends and familiar faces might die, of course I wanna stop her.

So I summed all that up to the other reincarnations, and we parted ways.

Oh, Asaka came with me, of course!

We've both lost our trademark weapons, but we're still pretty strong, compared to the average human.

I'm sure we can be of some help in battle.

So I charged all the way to the battlefield, until…

"Wha…?!"

"Oh, you're awake?"

Huh? Asaka?

"Whuh? Huh? Was I asleep?!"

"Yes, you were. But it's still early, if you'd like to go back to sleep a little longer."

Oh, okay…then I guess I'll take you up on that and go back to…

"Why would I just go back to sleep?!"

Now I remember!

Wasn't I on the battlefield?!

This is no time for sleeping, is it?!

I sit up and look around wildly, only to find that I'm not on a battlefield at all.

"…Huh?"

I'm in an unfamiliar room, where someone's put me in a bed.

"…Where am I?"

"Uppenbebetenia."

"…Up in the what now?"

I've never heard of this place in my life…

"It's a small village. There's no reason you would've heard of it."

"Okay, hang on a sec. What's going on here?"

Why did I just wake up in bed in a village I've never heard of before?

"Oh, because I knocked you out cold and carried you all the way here."

"Whaaaaat?"

Uh, now I'm even more confused!

Why the hell would you do that?!

"Because if I let you fight, you would've been killed."

Asaka shrugs, like the answer is obvious.

"…You think so?"

"I know so."

"Yeesh…"

I sink back into the bed.

If Asaka says I would've died, she's probably right.

Which must be why she stopped me like this.

"Damn, I'm such a loser…"

I mutter before I can stop myself.

In the end, I just tried too hard to think, then came up with an answer that left Asaka to deal with the aftermath.

I didn't do a damn thing.

If anything, I just made serious trouble for Asaka.

"…You aren't angry?"

"Why would I be mad at you? If I'm gonna get mad at anyone, it's my own self for being so damn stupid."

"But I'm the one who prevented you from doing what you wanted."

"What'd be the point if I was just gonna die anyway?"

It's not like I want to die, either.

Sure, I jumped into battle because I didn't want my friends to die.

But I thought it over real hard before I did that.

Which means I wasn't sure enough to make a decision right away.

I got where Wakaba and her people were coming from, too.

Besides, after talking to Merazophis, my grudge against him faded a little.

It's not gone all the way, but I don't feel like I wanna throw my life away to fight him.

"I thought I'd be able to handle him a *little* more…but by your calculations, you think I woulda died, right?"

"Yes. Definitely."

"Oof, that hurts…"

I knew Merazophis was stronger of course. I just thought we might stand a chance of winning if Asaka and I fought him together.

But Asaka shot that right down.

When Asaka's opinion differs from mine, usually she's the one who's right.

Which means I really woulda died if I fought Merazophis.

"Gotcha…"

As much as it bums me out, it also kinda makes sense.

"Guess that's it for my quest-for-vengeance thing, then. No more playing the tragic hero."

In my old life, I hated how ordinary I was.

I kept kinda hoping something more exciting would happen, without ever doing anything about it myself.

And then I got exactly what I wished for. I got reincarnated, my clan got wiped out, and I started honing my strength to get revenge.

My despair when my clan was wiped out and my anger when I swore to have vengeance were all real, of course.

But if you ask whether I was maybe getting a little carried away 'cause of the circumstances, I can't say you'd be totally wrong.

When Merazophis dropped those truth bombs on us, all my dramatic feelings stopped having a place to go.

Then this whole battle for the fate of the world thing hit.

And I figured maybe I could do something important this time.

"Guess I got a little too big for my britches."

I was always just a normal high school boy, with no special qualities.

Getting reincarnated into a fantasy world didn't change that. I didn't magically become a hero who can save the world.

That's all there is to it.

"Asaka."

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"And, y'know…even if I am a loser and all that, I wanna spend my life with you."

"Naturally. Why are you stating something so obvious?"

"Obvious?"

"Yes, very obvious. We'll go on living together, get married, have babies, and finally die of old age surrounded by our grandchildren. All while saying what a good life we had, of course."

"Sounds good to me. Let's make sure we're holding hands when we pass away, too."

"Perfect."

Welp…

I didn't make the cut as a hero. But I better do my damndest to be a good husband for Asaka.

But for now, just for a minute, let me cry a little to mourn the death of the loser I was before.

Asaka

“There, there.”

I gently stroke Kunihiko’s head after he’s cried himself to sleep.

The childlike act of crying until you’re so exhausted you fall asleep strikes me as funny somehow, and a soft chuckle escapes my lips.

Despite his self-deprecating jokes about his “quest for vengeance” and “playing the tragic hero” being over now, I’ve seen firsthand how hard Kunihiko was fighting all this time.

The way he pushed himself to his limits as if he was running out of time was such a far cry from his previous life as an ordinary high school student that it never ceased to amaze me.

I could never do that sort of thing.

I hate hard work. I don’t like doing my best.

Everything in moderation, I say.

I usually go through life preserving my energy, and occasionally try a little harder only when it’s really necessary.

That level of effort feels just right for me.

I’m not the kind of person who works myself to the bone or puts my life on the line.

I just don’t have that kind of zeal.

But if anything, that’s what makes me respect people who can do such things.

Since I can’t do it myself, I’m always impressed with people who give it their all and really try their hardest.

…Even if I don’t understand them.

Kunihiko lives his life with fiery passion.

So much so that I worry he’ll burn himself up, body and soul.

If it were anyone but Kunihiko, I would’ve stopped trying to keep up with him long ago.

I nearly told him “Let’s just give up already” more times than I can count.

But I never brought myself to say it, because I wanted to let him do as he pleased.

I liked watching him recklessly charge on ahead.

And having his back was a lot easier than you might imagine.

It certainly required a lot of the hard work and extra effort that I hate so much.

But being by Kunihiko’s side feels so right that I couldn’t imagine going anywhere else.

Kunihiko always tries to run full speed ahead, while I prefer to walk at a leisurely pace.

You wouldn’t think we’d ever be able to keep the same pace, yet somehow, we’ve managed to stay joined at this hip all this time.

Honestly, I think it’s nothing short of a miracle.

If we’d taken one wrong step, we could’ve easily wound up lost beyond all hope of repair.

I might have fallen behind, or Kunihiko might have gotten seriously injured or worse…

We always made it through with help from the advantage of being reincarnations.

But there’s no guarantee it’ll always be this way.

There’s a limit, I know.

I saw it up close when we fought Merazophis in the war against the demons.

Kunihiko and I couldn’t even take him as a team; even with Ms. Oka’s help and support from a long-distance sniper, we were just barely able to make an even match.

Merazophis was able to fend off all four of us all by himself, and managed to withdraw with barely a scratch, too.

We couldn’t win.

If we ever fought Merazophis again, Kunihiko and I would likely both be killed.

After our conversation with him in the elf village, that suspicion turned to certainty.

He was connected to Wakaba’s group, and was deliberately not killing us because we’re reincarnations.

That means he was actually holding back when we fought, and we still couldn’t come close to beating him.

He’s too strong.

I do think that Kunihiko and I can still grow stronger, too.

But we wouldn't be able to fight Merazophis if we fought him now, and even if we took the time to train more, there's no guarantee we'd catch up.

It's not like we have any convenient way of getting stronger all at once, either.

Nor do we have enough time to find one.

Everything is happening so fast, and there's nothing we can do.

In the end, I'm just an ordinary person with no motivation.

I can't fight the flow of such enormous events, nor do I have the energy to try.

I don't even want to have anything to do with it.

Ideally, I'd rather just watch from someplace safe.

In fact, I would much prefer that outrageous events, like a battle for the fate of the world, would take place where I don't even have to know about them.

I want to run away.

Kunihiko, on the other hand, stayed firmly in place and thought about what to do.

He got so deep in thought that there was a big crease between his eyebrows, which is very unlike him—he never thinks for long about anything.

And his conclusion was that he would fight for the ebony god's side.

This would mean fighting against the ivory god's side, which also meant fighting Merazophis once again.

I've always let Kunihiko do exactly what he wanted.

I thought supporting him in that way was my role.

So this time, it was my turn to worry about what to do.

Should I let Kunihiko have his way, and see the fight through even if it meant death?

Or should I stop him by force?

It was a difficult decision.

I had to chose between protecting Kunihiko's pride, or his life.

Thus, I hesitated until the very last minute, and basically decided on the spot.

When we saw Merazophis, I immediately thought: *Ah, we're going to die.*

And then I acted almost entirely on reflex.

I knocked out Kunihiko, picked him up, and ran for it.

Fortunately, Merazophis didn't chase after us.

I suppose he had no reason to.

Merazophis might be a bitter enemy from Kunihiko's and my perspective, but far from hating us, he even seemed to feel sympathy for us.

In the end, Kunihiko's passion for vengeance was entirely one-sided.

He realized as much himself in the elf village, and that seemed to take the wind out of his sails entirely.

Even so, the fact that he chose to fight after a rare period of thinking hard about it must mean that he had strong feelings on the matter.

And I completely disregarded those feelings.

This might be the end, I thought.

I'd always believed that there was virtually nothing that could tear the two of us apart.

But this instance might be extreme enough to qualify.

After all, I just destroyed his big, once-in-a-lifetime moment.

I was sure he'd be furious when he woke up.

It might even ruin our relationship beyond recovery.

But even then, as awful as that would be, I wanted Kunihiko to live, no matter what.

And as it turns out, my fears of splitting up were entirely unfounded.

Far from getting angry at me, he actually apologized.

While a part of me felt that I was the one who ought to be sorry, I was also thrilled and relieved that even this couldn't destroy the bond between us.

After Merazophis killed the rest of our clan, when we barely escaped and reached a town…it was Kunihiko who held my hand and led me forward.

Kunihiko who was by my side.

So I resolved to stay by his side forever.

As long as he didn't shake me off himself, that is.

I'm not sure what the future holds for us—even less sure than when our home was destroyed and we were left with nowhere to go and no idea why it had happened.

Maybe we'll actually get to live the normal life I want, or maybe it'll be the action-packed life of Kunihiko's dreams.

Maybe we won't have a future at all, and our lives will soon be

at an end.

But that's all the more reason for me to stay by Kunihiko's side.

Until death do us part.

Wrath

“Urgh?!”

This humanoid creature has a combination of dragon and fishlike features.

And I just sliced off one of its arms.

“Damned child!”

The…draconic merman…? waves his remaining arm around.

A torrent of water whirls through the air in sync with his movements, attempting to engulf me.

I fling a knife-size exploding sword at it.

The resulting explosion collides with the gushing water.

There’s so much water that one small explosion was only enough to slow its momentum for just a moment.

But that moment is all I need.

I use it to close the distance between myself and my opponent, aiming to slice off his head.

The creature avoids my slash by ducking out of the way, and my sword only nicks his skin.

Good thing I’m a dual-wielder.

I thrust my other magic sword toward his chest, aiming for his heart.

Just as it’s about to hit its target, a cascade of water slams into me, forcing me away.

Dammit.

I guess I should’ve expected no less of an ancient dragon. None of my usual moves are enough to take him down.

Still, he’s lost an arm and is wounded all over.

This is one of the ancient water dragons that’s attacking the Upper Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Sophia managed to hold them off at first, but obviously she

couldn't defend the entire Upper Stratum of the world's biggest labyrinth all on her own, which is why I came running to belatedly join the fight.

The narrow, winding passageways of the Great Elroe Labyrinth are far from my ideal battlefield.

My greatest strength is using exploding swords and other magic swords to inflict damage on a wide area at once, which isn't the best idea in the Upper Stratum, where it could easily cause a cave-in.

As much as I would have preferred to let Sophia handle this alone, this is hardly the time to be choosy.

Thanks to the multitude of ancient dragons attacking all at once —not to mention all in different places—to open up holes that let the ocean flood into the Upper Stratum, the entire Great Elroe Labyrinth is starting to get submerged in water.

Considering the sheer size of this place, it's not likely to get totally flooded anytime soon. Even so, it's not the kind of problem we can just ignore, either.

The best solution would be to take out the water dragons ASAP.

Unfortunately, they're all ancient dragons.

Dragons are powerful enough as it is, to say nothing of the ones that have lived an especially long time and grown even stronger accordingly.

It's going to be tough to take them down—in fact, I might even get killed in the process.

Or so I thought…but so far, that hasn't been the case at all.

"Damn it all…! I won't lose to a mere human…!"

"Sorry, but I'm not actually human."

I'm an oni, to be precise.

Evidently taking my words as a challenge, the water dragon lets out a roar and raises more water.

I charge forward in response, clashing with my opponent.

The water dragon's head goes flying.

Immediately, the wildly moving water he was controlling drops back to the ground with a splash.

I watch the dragon's corpse sink beneath the water, then move on to find my next target.

Water dragons are strong.

They reign as the apex predators of their ecosystem, turning the ocean into a territory that no one else can cross.

They're certainly nothing to sneeze at.

But that strength is now working against them.

They're actually *too* strong.

Since they were unopposed for so long in their home field of the ocean, they've probably grown accustomed to destroying their targets with little to no resistance.

Which means they don't have much, if any, battle experience.

They've always been able to just sink their foes into the ocean without having to fight at all.

Strong as they are, they're used to wielding that strength in the simplest way possible.

That makes them much easier to deal with.

On top of that, this isn't their usual ocean territory.

Unlike the ocean with its endless supply of water, this is land, albeit land that's starting to get submerged.

They have to keep their powers in check here, just like I do.

And their usual forms as dragons are probably enormous.

All the water dragons I've seen have been in human form.

While most dragons can transform into humans, their powers definitely shine brightest when they're in their original form.

With all these constraints and their lack of battle experience, it's only natural that they wouldn't be able to beat me.

Honestly, I feel a little bad. They've lived long enough to be called ancient dragons, and now I'm bringing their lives to an end without them even being able to fight at their full strength.

But I wouldn't say their deaths will be in vain.

The holes they created linking the Upper Stratum to the ocean are still open.

Sophia can freeze the water to cut off the flow, at least temporarily, but all I can do is destroy things with fire and lightning.

There's nothing I can do to close up a hole in the ceiling.

It certainly makes me wish I'd studied Earth Magic or something, although there's no point in complaining about that now.

I feel foolish for only being able to destroy things, even though I chose to build up my strength in that direction.

At any rate, we have to take out the water dragons as quickly as possible and seal the holes they created.

The only one of us with the ability to do the latter is Sophia.

Which probably means that I should take over her battle against the chief of the water dragons, freeing her up to go around sealing those holes.

That's why I've been making my way toward Sophia, defeating any water dragons I encounter along the way…except those two keep moving around as they fight.

I'm barely getting any closer, even though I'm chasing them as fast as I can.

All because the chief of the water dragons is keeping away from Sophia as they do battle, prompting Sophia to get annoyed and go after her.

She's pretty good, that water dragon chief.

I'm guessing she's realized that she can't beat Sophia and is stalling for time instead.

She's trying to survive as long as she can, in hopes of putting us on the ropes, even if she likely won't manage to drag it out until the Great Elroe Labyrinth is sunk completely.

Sophia must realize that, too.

But she still can't finish her off.

It wouldn't be wise to just let the water dragon chief run free, either.

If such a powerful enemy was left to her own devices, I'm sure she would open another massive hole somewhere, flooding the place that much faster.

That leaves Sophia with no choice but to keep chasing after the chief, even knowing that she's only stalling for time.

…At least, I'd certainly *like* to think that Sophia is not just getting wound up and chasing her around.

Ideally, I was hoping Sophia and I could catch the water dragon chief in a pincer attack and make short work of her, but clearly it's not going to be that easy.

The fact that the two of them are moving away from me as I go after them means that the water dragon chief has already sensed my presence and is acting accordingly.

She's quick at assessing the situation and making smart judgments.

This is going to be tough.

I have to get to Sophia as soon as possible, even if we can't pull off a pincer attack.

Except water keeps blocking my path.

I've entered a zone that's already completely submerged.

The Upper Stratum is already hard enough to navigate at full speed with its narrow, winding passages, and now parts of it are underwater as well?

Talk about frustrating.

On top of that, I already sense another water dragon obstructing my way forward.

Fighting will take up more time, making it even harder for me to catch up to Sophia.

Still, I can't just ignore the water dragon and keep moving, either.

"What a pain…"

I groan aloud despite myself.

I'll just have to take out this frustration on the water dragon blocking my way.

But just as I'm bracing myself for a fight…

Four shadows speed past me and attack the waiting water dragon.

Aren't those the puppet taratects?

Why are they here instead of guarding Miss Ariel?

No, I guess that's a silly question.

Miss Ariel must have seen the current situation, decided that we needed backup, and sent them in to help.

Honestly, I am grateful.

But what about Miss Ariel's safety?

The enemy could easily launch a surprise attack on the Lower or Bottom Stratum while we're busy here in the Upper Stratum.

As strong as she was before, Miss Ariel can barely even fight anymore.

Will sending her guards away work out in her favor, or against her?

I'd hate to see Miss White's reaction if something happens to Miss Ariel…

Now I have even more reason to hurry it up.

"I'm going on ahead!"

With a quick word to the puppet taratects, I rush onward, leaving them to take care of the water dragon.

The four of them together should be able to handle it, even if the water dragon is more powerful individually.

Besides, while the water dragon can't fight at its full strength

due to the terrain, the spider girls have home-field advantage in this cramped space.

The Upper Stratum is basically their hunting ground.

It might be a little harder to navigate now that it's partly submerged, but that shouldn't be too big of a problem for them.

They were able to catch up to me easily enough, anyway.

The fact that my speed stat is probably higher than theirs didn't stop them.

That's probably because they're much better at using the walls and even ceilings of the labyrinth to move even faster.

Between that and my inability to seal a hole, I guess I've still got a long ways to go in many respects.

It's ironic that I'm realizing my own inadequacy in what will be our final battle.

Too bad I'll never have a chance to put that knowledge to use.

…Too bad, huh?

If I'm thinking about it that way, maybe I still have attachments to this life after all?

I never planned to survive this battle.

My hands are stained with so much blood already.

Enough is enough.

The moment I killed Buirimus and avenged my goblin clan, my life lost all meaning and purpose.

In fact, when I died back in the classroom, I probably should have just stayed dead.

I only stayed alive in this world out of habit.

Yet even though I was living on nothing but inertia, I still sent countless others to their deaths.

Eventually, I have to pay the price.

And all I have to offer for that is my own life.

So whether we win or lose this battle, I had no intention of surviving.

And yet…

The chaotic days of the recent past flash across my mind.

Sophia flaring up at me, Mr. Merazophis panicking behind her, Miss Ariel gently trying to calm everyone down, and Miss White watching in silence, or occasionally kicking Sophia to the curb.

Those times might have been crazy, but they weren't bad.

But that's all over now.

We can never go back to that again.

I've known that for ages, or at least I thought I did.

So I can't falter now.

Stay sharp.

Finish what you started.

And the first step is taking over this fight against the chief of the water dragons!

There!

Running as fast as I can, occasionally swimming through a sunken passage, I finally catch up to where Sophia and the water dragon are locked in battle.

The water dragon chief is purely focused on keeping away from Sophia and attacking from afar, while Sophia is determinedly chasing after her.

They're evenly matched in terms of long-distance warfare.

However, the nature of the water and ice seems to have Sophia at a bit of a loss as to how to break through.

Sophia can freeze her opponent's water, except then the ice ends up serving as an obstacle that aids in the water dragon chief's retreat.

But if she doesn't freeze the water, her opponent will be able to control it and move freely.

No wonder this battle has been taking so long.

I'm sure Sophia would win eventually, due to her superior abilities…if the Great Elroe Labyrinth doesn't flood completely first.

"Sophia!"

"…Tch!"

Noticing me, Sophia clicks her tongue, looking annoyed.

"Leave this to me and go seal the holes!"

"…Ugh, fine, I know! You handle it, then!"

With that, Sophia crossly turns on her heel and leaves.

Knowing her, she probably wanted to finish this fight herself.

But she still let me take over because she knows our overall victory is more important than her winning this particular battle.

Otherwise, there's no way someone as prideful as Sophia would hand over her prey.

Since she was selfless enough to prioritize the team's goals over her own satisfaction, I'd better make sure I live up to her expectations.

"Oh dear. I've been dealt quite the difficult hand."

The water dragon chief quirks an eyebrow.

“But are you sure you oughtn’t have come at me two against one?”

“No need. This won’t take long.”

She wrinkles her nose in apparent displeasure at my statement.

“You’d do well not to underestimate me, hmm?”

“I’m not. That’s why I’m going to use all of my strength to finish you as quickly as possible.”

The water dragon chief must be very strong.

If we fought in the ocean, where her full strength would be on display, she might very well have defeated Sophia and me both.

She has far more finesse than the other water dragons, too.

That much is clear from the fact that she was able to keep Sophia at bay for so long.

So I’m going to give it everything I’ve got, too.

Because I have no other choice.

“Such overconfidence! Oh, I can hardly wait to smash it to pieces!”

No, it’s not overconfidence.

It’s just that because I recognize how powerful the water dragon chief is, I’m going to break out my ace in the hole right away.

My Wrath.

“GRAAAAAAHHH!”

As soon as I activate the Wrath skill, the world is dyed a deep red.

My brain, my body, my pulse, every fiber of my being demands that I slaughter every living thing in sight.

I let that overpowering urge take control, swinging my magic sword at the water dragon chief before my eyes.

Though my war cry seemed to intimidate her for a moment, she quickly recovers and sends a wave of water toward me.

The torrent takes up the entire narrow passageway.

There’s no way to dodge it.

But I don’t need to, anyway.

I unleash the full power of my magic swords, surrounding my body with their might.

Flames and lightning twine around me, evaporating the wave of water.

“But…how…?”

The evaporating torrent produces shock waves that churn toward me, but I ignore them, press forward, and slice the water

dragon chief in half.

When Wrath is activated, all my stats reach 99,999.

That's the max value they can have, stronger than even Miss Ariel in her prime, at least in terms of numbers alone.

In this state, no ordinary attack can lay a scratch on me, and almost nothing can withstand my blade.

However, it comes at a high cost.

"Hfff…hfff…! Calm down! That's enough!"

I turn off Wrath and stop my spirit from being swallowed up.

The Wrath skill makes the user lose all sense of reason.

If it fully consumes me, even once, I'll be permanently transformed into a senseless monster that attacks anything in sight.

Even after training up the Heresy Resistance skill, which reduces negative effects on the soul and spirit, to the point of becoming Heresy Nullification, it still wasn't enough to get rid of the effects of the Wrath skill completely.

For now, I can bring myself back like this if I only use it for a short time. But if I keep using the skill, I know for a fact that eventually I won't be able to come back anymore.

I imagine the Wrath skill has special settings that prevent its consequences from being fully negated.

All this is why I've avoided using it at all costs, but against the water dragon chief, I had no other choice.

Sophia and I are about equal in power, I think.

If she couldn't defeat that opponent over a long period of time, this was the only way I'd be able to do it quickly.

"*Koff!* I'm…sorr…I…offer…"

The water dragon chief murmurs something, despite her upper and lower half being neatly separated.

Then her body crumbles into dust and disappears.

…I see.

She must have offered herself up…sacrificing her soul to the system.

By offering your soul to the system, you can turn all its energy into the system's fuel.

Of course, that means you'll never be reborn again, since your soul itself is lost.

It's a fate beyond death: nothingness.

Yet as she was about to die, she offered up her soul.

That proves she must have come into this battle fully prepared

to end it all.

Just like me.

“Wait a little longer. I’ll offer myself up, too, before this battle is over.”

Whether we win or lose, I intend to sacrifice my own soul.

Death alone wouldn’t be enough to atone for everything I’ve done.

So I’m going to give up all that I am.

But the time hasn’t come for that, not just yet.

First, I have to fight my hardest for the ivory god’s victory, so that the deaths of everyone I’ve killed won’t be in vain.

Even if it ends with me disappearing forever.

I take a moment of silence for the place where the water dragons’ chief fell, then move on in order to defeat the rest of them.

WATER DRAGON IENA

An ancient dragon chief, she leads the water dragons and rules over the vast oceans. She has the most subordinates of any of the ancient dragon chiefs. She is also perhaps the strongest dragon of all, and a leader of sorts even among the other ancient dragons. Her true form is akin to a Chinese dragon, over six hundred feet long. She can control massive amounts of seawater to crush, drown, and wash away anything in her path. A true lord of the sea, she is unmatched by any other ancient dragon, or indeed any legendary-class monster, when surrounded by her watery home. Though her human form has a gentle, feminine appearance, this belies her sharp tongue and tendency to quickly resort to violence. This is yet another reason that the other ancient dragon chiefs find it difficult to oppose her.

Filimøs

What in the world am I supposed to do?

After learning the deeds of Potimas and the elves, I realized that instead of protecting my precious students, I had only put them in danger.

And that everything I've done all this time has been in vain.

Then, before I had time to dwell on my regrets, this calamitous world quest arose.

I don't want to think about anything anymore.

I just want to scream and cry, curl up under a blanket, and fall asleep.

And then wake up back in my own bed in Japan.

I want to open my eyes and feel the relief of knowing that this was all just a bad dream.

But none of that is going to happen.

This is reality, not a bad dream.

So there's nowhere to run.

All I can do is hug my knees to my chest and try to close my heart and mind.

"Ms. Oka! Please, get a hold of yourself!"

Yet this situation won't even allow me that much.

Miss Kudo grabs my hand, forcing me to my feet.

"Can't we just fly away?!"

"I dunno how to control this thing!"

"I found the button that shoots laser beams! Fire, fire!"

My students' shouts echo around the cockpit.

We're currently inside a UFO-like flying vehicle that the elves apparently created.

The Demon Lord used this to get us out of the elf village.

Then she left, telling us we could use it however we wanted.

Tagawa and Kushitani declared that they were joining the ebony god's side and left, and Kusama said he was going to check in with the Word of God church. Most of the remaining reincarnations have nowhere else to go since they spent most of their lives in the elf village.

Left with no direction, the reincarnations gathered aboard the UFO to have a meeting about what to do next.

Then, out of nowhere, monsters attacked the UFO.

More monsters kept showing up, and now here we are.

"Dammit! Why are there so many of them?!"

"Maybe because this is a product of Taboo?"

Why would all these monsters start attacking the UFO?

Probably because it's an advanced technological weapon that shouldn't exist in this world.

It wouldn't surprise me if the monsters were programmed to be hostile toward such things.

Monsters are aggressive toward humans, but I've never seen nor heard of them attacking all at once with such determination, heedless of their different monster species.

Or perhaps the world quest had some effect on the monsters, too, causing them to attack.

It could even be a combination of both.

In the cockpit, my students scramble madly, trying to figure out how to control the UFO.

They seem to have at least found the defense controls, shooting beams from the UFO to mow down monsters.

Normally, that would be enough to make the other monsters scatter and flee; instead, they become even more aggressive.

A large monster slams against the UFO with a loud crash.

Since this UFO is much bigger than the monster, the impact doesn't reach us in the cockpit, but the students still look shaken.

This must be a shocking experience for them since they never encountered any kind of violence in the elf village.

"Ms. Oka, please help us find a manual and figure out how to fly this thing! Your fellow elves built it, right?!"

Miss Kudo leads me over to what looks like a control panel and presses me into the seat.

But I didn't even know that the elves could make such things, nor do I have any idea how to control it myself.

Still, time refuses to wait for me, and I can do nothing but

watch blankly as my students frantically fire back at the monsters.

I really am a failure as a teacher…

I've got no words of wisdom for them in their time of need, no energy to do anything at all.

My mind is bizarrely blank, robbing me of any desire to move.

I can't do this anymore.

"Ms. Oka!"

"Forget it, class rep! We've got bigger fish to fry right now!"

"But…!"

Kudo and another student are arguing about something.

But I still can't move.

I don't want to.

I've persevered long enough already.

And all of that was for nothing.

My efforts were in vain.

So clearly there's no point in even trying.

Why bother moving when I'm clearly not good for anything?

"Oh god…"

I pull my knees up into the chair and cry.

I'm much too old to let my students see me in such a pathetic state, yet I don't even feel any shame.

My mind must have gotten just as childish as my small elf body.

"Ah! There's someone outside?!"

The surprised shout prompts me to look at the screen, where I see two people fighting the monsters as if to protect the UFO.

It's a man using his shield to knock the monsters back, while a woman shoots magic from behind him.

Aren't those Shun's friends, Hyrince and Anna?!

There are way too many monsters for them to handle, even if Hyrince is a former member of the hero's party and Anna is an experienced mage.

"Ms. Oka?!"

That thought prompts my body to move on its own.

Even though I've been sitting here refusing to do anything.

I run from the cockpit and toward the entrance of the UFO.

Then I open the hatch, jump outside, and realize I don't have any weapons.

But I can still use magic.

"Get down, please!"

Sprinting up behind Hyrince and Anna, I cast a spell.

A fearsome gust of wind swallows up a swathe of monsters, clearing a path.

“Quick, come inside!”

“Don’t worry about us! Just hurry and take off!”

“We don’t know how to fly it! Please, come in with us! It should at least be safer than outside!”

“You what?! Ugh, damn her! She couldn’t even show you that much before she left?!”

Hyrince curses as he grabs Anna’s hand and comes running.

The monsters that avoided the wind blast chase after them, but Anna and I use our magic to hold them off.

We manage to make it back to the still-open hatch of the UFO, and all three of us jump inside.

Just as Hyrince reaches up to close the hatch, a monster tries to jump in after us.

I knock it back with another wind spell.

Then Hyrince pulls the hatch shut.

“Whew. Wait, no, I can’t catch my breath just yet.”

Hyrince heads deeper into the UFO.

I follow him, a little taken aback by his confident steps.

“That was awesome, Ms. Oka!”

Though I’m happy to hear my students cheer when I return to the cockpit, we’re not out of the woods just yet.

“Please keep shooting for now!”

“Yes’m!”

“Right!”

The students turn back to their respective control panels.

“Looks like you’ve finally recovered, Ms. Oka.”

I’m not entirely sure whether Miss Kudo is right about that or not.

I just reacted instinctively, and part of me fears that I might curl up and cry again at any moment.

Ignoring our exchange, Hyrince starts operating one of the control panels.

His hands move quickly, as if he knows exactly how to use it.

“Mr. Hyrince?”

Just as I start to address him, the UFO vibrates once and rises into the air.

“We’re flying?!”

“All of you, hang on to something!”

Hyrince's shout prompts me to hurry over to the nearest wall.

Immediately, the UFO shoots into the air, shaking off the monsters and taking flight.

In spite of this sudden movement, the cockpit scarcely shakes at all—perhaps a testament to the elves' technology.

Even if I hadn't grabbed on to anything, I don't think I would have lost my balance.

The ground shrinks beneath us.

Soon, the monsters are out of sight.

The students breathe a sigh of relief as they see this.

"Phew. Just in time."

Hyrince, too, lets his shoulders slump in relief.

"Erm, Mr. Hyrince, who are you really…?"

Why in the world did he know how to operate this UFO?

Hyrince catches the meaning in my question.

And his response shakes me to my core.

"Ah, right. I guess there's no use hiding it anymore. I am Hyrince Quarto, and that is no lie. But I have another face, as well. I'm also a part of Güliedistodiez, the administrator of this planet whom the world quest calls the 'ebony god.'"

"When I say I'm a part of the ebony god, I mean that I am a sort of double that he created in order to watch and listen to humans, since he cannot be directly involved in their society. He's been observing humanity through my eyes, basically. But it's not a surveillance thing—more like a means of relieving many years of boredom, if anything. So honestly, I don't serve any particular purpose in this world. This situation doesn't change that. The only power I have of my own is that of a normal human, the man called Hyrince. Sure, there have been times when I synchronized with the ebony god and so on, but for the most part I've lived my life purely as Hyrince. And even though the ebony god can meddle with me, I can't do a thing to him. So we're not in communication at the moment."

With that speech, Hyrince shrugs.

In other words, Hyrince was able to control this UFO because he has the ebony god's memories.

Judging by Anna's shocked expression throughout this explanation, she didn't know Hyrince was connected to the ebony god, either.

“So to summarize, is it safe to say you are the human called Hyrince, and not the ebony god?”

“That’s a fine way to look at it. In fact, maybe it’s not so different from you reincarnations. If you think of me as a normal human with the memories of my previous life as the ebony god, you wouldn’t be too far off.”

I see. That’s certainly something all of us can understand.

“Does this mean that you’ll be fighting for the ebony god?”

“…No. Like I said, I only have the power of a normal human. I’m not strong enough to make a difference in this battle. So I wasn’t really planning on doing anything…until I happened to spot this ship being attacked, anyway.”

Hyrince chuckles awkwardly.

It doesn’t seem to me like he’s lying.

“But I guess I’m rooting for the ebony god, even if I’m not siding with him. I understand very well how he feels, since I have his memories and all.”

“You’re not going to side with him even though you understand his feelings?”

“It’s *because* I understand him that I can’t side with him, see. I don’t think what the ebony god’s side is doing is right. I doubt he thinks so himself, either. But he’s going to do it anyway, just because he has to, even if it’s not right. That’s why I’m rooting for him, but not siding with him.”

I see…maybe?

It sounds like the ebony god has a lot of complicated feelings, too.

Even from the perspective of a partial outsider like me, it’s hard to say that either side is right, based on the contents of Taboo. The situation is too complex.

I’m sure it’s even harder for someone like the ebony god, who’s right at the center of the conflict.

“Long story short, I’m not getting involved in this fight. So I don’t care that you have ruler authority or anything, Ms. Oka. I’ll just be the bouncer for this ship or something.”

Mr. Hyrince raises both palms to emphasize that he means no harm.

“I do want to talk to you alone for a minute, though. Is that okay?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Wait a minute, please.”

Miss Kudo interrupts my agreement and comes over to whisper in my ear.

“Can we really trust him?”

“It’ll be fine, I think.”

I don’t sense any ill intent from Hyrince.

“…I’m sorry, but we can’t count on your judgment alone.”

…I suppose I can’t argue with that, since I let Potimas take advantage of me for so long.

“If you’re worried, we can stay in sight. How about we stay on this side of the room? That way you can see us but not hear us.”

Hyrince’s suggestion makes perfect sense: The cockpit is large enough that our conversation shouldn’t be audible if we stand at the other end.

It would allow the others to keep an eye on us, too.

“That’s all right with me.”

“…Boys, if anything happens to Ms. Oka, go rescue her right away.”

The boys nod uncertainly at Miss Kudo’s command, although I doubt they’d stand a chance against Hyrince even if they all came after him at once.

He was in the former hero’s party for good reason.

By comparison, these students who barely raised their levels in the elf village probably wouldn’t be able to fight Hyrince at all.

If anyone here could be a match for Mr. Hyrince, it would be myself or Ms. Anna.

Now that we’ve let him into the UFO, if Hyrince had any treacherous intentions, it would already be too late to stop him.

If he does try anything, I’ll just have to handle it somehow.

Though personally…I think we can trust him.

Hyrince and I walk to the other side of the cockpit.

“Now, we can’t have anyone overhearing this. Let’s use Telepathy to talk.”

“All right.”

“Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.”

Our conversation begins by way of Telepathy, though I can’t imagine what Mr. Hyrince wants to talk to me about.

What could be so secret that he would go to such lengths to avoid having the students hear it?

“I believe you have a skill that shows you certain information about the reincarnations. What does it currently say about their future?”

“How did you know that?!”

I’ve never told Hyrince about my unique skill, Student Roster.

It gives me brief information about my reincarnated students’ pasts, presents, and futures.

The reason I decided to keep them in custody in the elf village in the first place is because the “future” column showed that most of my students would die.

I used the “past” column to deduce their hometowns.

“It’s easy enough to guess. You were able to track down the exact locations of the reincarnations all over the world and bring them to the elf village for safekeeping, which means you had some way of getting information about them. And since you were certain that they had to be protected, you must have known something about their future. For instance, that they were going to die, perhaps.”

…He’s exactly right.

“And yet, you never told them this. Which means there must be a restriction that prevents you from discussing it. That’s the logical conclusion, anyway. Am I right? Ah, no need to respond if you can’t talk about that, either, of course.”

…That’s all correct, too.

“If you can’t say anything about it at all, that’s all right. But I would appreciate it if you could check what that skill says about the reincarnations’ futures right now.”

“…Very well.”

In all the chaos, I haven’t checked my Student Roster since the battle at the elf village.

At the time, it showed that all the students who have lots of skills were going to die by having their skills stripped away from them.

And it also said that Hugo—Natsume—was going to die in battle in the elf village.

But Natsume survived that battle.

The future has changed.

So it’s entirely possible that the other reincarnations’ described futures might be different now as well.

If anything, it’s very likely that they’ve changed, now that the world quest has been thrown into the mix.

Nervously, I close my eyes and activate Student Roster.

Information about my students appears in my mind's eye.

And it says…

"Huh?! …Whah?!"

I let out two exclamations in a row.

The first is out of surprise at the information I saw in my Student Roster.

The second is at the shaking of the UFO.

"We're under attack!"

One of the students shouts.

I look at the giant monitor in the cockpit and see flying monsters swarming around the UFO.

"They're really still chasing us?!"

Miss Kudo's cry echoes my own bewildered thoughts.

"Looks like we'd better discuss this later."

"Ah…"

Hyrince starts to walk away.

It's true, we should probably wait to talk until we're not under enemy fire.

But if what I just read is true, then…!

I grab Hyrince's hand.

"What is it?"

Hyrince turns around in surprise.

This is no time for chatting.

But I have to relay this information right away!

"No, wait! This is terrible! At this rate, mankind will be doomed!"

"What?!"

"We had it all wrong! The 'evil god' isn't the ivory god!"

"…What do you mean?"

We had the wrong idea entirely!

We misunderstood about the "evil god" the world quest mentioned!

<An evil god is plotting to sacrifice humanity in order to prevent the destruction of the world. You must either prevent this plot, or assist with it.>

That's what the world quest announcement said.

The sequence that followed revealed the truth about this world, and that the ivory god was planning to sacrifice more than half of humanity to free the goddess Sariel.

Along with the fact that we could pray to help or hinder the ivory god.

Based on all that, we just assumed that the “evil god” referred to the ivory god.

But we were wrong.

<The Evil God D rings the final bell of judgment. Evil God D will exterminate half of humanity.>

For some reason, this was stated in my Student Roster.

“The Evil God D rings the bell of judgment! Evil God D is the one who’s going to sacrifice half of humanity!”

“…No way. Are you serious…?”

Hyrince covers his mouth with a trembling hand.

“That can’t be true…can it? …No, it can. This is D we’re talking about. If anything, that makes much more sense! Dammit! So that was the plan all along!”

He pushes his hair back roughly.

“No matter how the battle between the ebony and ivory gods plays out, D is going to sacrifice half of all humans and demons regardless!”

Wait, but if that’s true…what is the purpose of the battle that’s going on now?

“Why would this be in my Student Roster…?”

“That’s obvious. Because D is the one who gave you the Student Roster skill in the first place.”

“But even then, what was the point of sending me this message?”

“Maybe it’s supposed to be a hint? D is taunting us with a tiny glimmer of hope that we can avoid destruction somehow.”

But how would we even go about that…?

“Ah?!”

It seems the battle outside has progressed while Hyrince and I were talking.

There’s a blaze of bright light on the monitor, and I automatically close my eyes.

Then, when I cautiously crack them open, I see a familiar face sitting atop a wyrm.

“Shun?!”

“Shun!”

Hyrince and I exclaim almost in unison.

On the monitor, Shun and his friends had just defeated the flying monsters.

Shun 2

After we met with the pontiff, we were at a loss for what to do next.

To be honest, there aren't any clear means of doing anything about this situation.

The ivory god's army, including the Demon Lord, are holed up in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, which means we can't really meet with them.

Though I figured it was worth a shot and went to peek at the situation for myself, I found that there was already a queen taratect guarding the entrance, surrounded by a swarm of her spider monster spawn.

Obviously, it didn't look like they were open to talking things out.

Especially since our side includes me and Natsume, with access to that "ruler authority" thing, as well as former members of the ebony god's side: the ancient Wind Dragon Hyuvan, Ice Dragon Nia, and Dark Dragon Reise.

If we approach, they might very well assume we're enemies and attack.

As we were trying to decide what to do next, we spotted what appeared to be a UFO being attacked by monsters in the far-off sky.

Can you blame me if I did a double take at that?

I mean, what is a UFO doing in this fantasy world?

It wasn't just me, either; Sue, Natsume, and the others were all stunned, too.

But since the pontiff mentioned during the meeting that the Demon Lord had taken possession of an elf-made spaceship and had flown to the Great Elroe Labyrinth, we quickly figured out that the UFO must be the spaceship in question.

So we decided to defend the UFO—especially since there might

be someone from the ivory god's side aboard.

What happened next was a slaughter.

"Bwa-ha-ha-haaa! You're a hundred—no, a thousand!—years too young to try to take ME on in the skies!"

Wind Dragon Hyuvan whizzes around in the sky at speeds far faster than I would have expected from his giant size.

Once he transformed back into his original dragon form, Hyuvan wiped out the monsters swarming the UFO in a matter of seconds.

I rode on Fei's back to fight a little, too, but honestly, he could've handled it fine without us.

That's how overwhelmingly strong Hyuvan was.

So this is the power of an ancient dragon chief…

I don't think I'd be able to beat him.

If the ivory god's army is confident they can square off against several of those chiefs, there's definitely no way I'd stand a chance against them.

From that point of view, I think my decision not to join either side was the right call.

If I'd joined one or the other, I would probably have died without contributing to the battle at all.

Once the monsters have been dealt with, the UFO lands on the newly cleared ground.

Then several familiar faces come climbing out.

It's Ms. Oka, some of the other reincarnations, and even Hyrince and Anna!

"Heeey!"

I wave from atop Fei's back, flying down closer.

"I'm glad you're all right!"

"That's my line, mister! Where in the world have you been?!"

Ms. Oka huffs at me crossly.

Ah, I guess she has a point.

From their perspective, it must have seemed like I just vanished into thin air.

"Well, I actually got teleported to who-knows-where by this little guy…"

I take out the little white spider that's remained in my pocket all this time.

While a few of the girls draw back, Ms. Oka leans forward with a sparkle in her eyes.

“Is it alive?”

“It seems to be. It hasn’t moved at all, though.”

The white spider doesn’t react, even if I poke and prod at it.

This thing randomly fell on my head, then I was teleported to some sandy beach in the middle of nowhere.

Where Sue was lying in wait…

I managed to escape, thanks to Elder Ronandt, although we still have no idea where that place was, since we used teleportation to leave.

But I guess it doesn’t matter, since I’m sure we’ll never go back there again.

I put the unmoving white spider back in my pocket.

For some reason, even though it’s the culprit that sent me to that place, I can’t bring myself to throw it away.

“So, as you can see, we’re all safe. What about everyone else? I don’t see Tagawa or Kushitani, for a start…”

“The two of them said they were joining the ebony god’s side and left. Kusama did, too.”

“I see…”

I guess it makes sense that Tagawa and Kushitani would choose to fight, since they’ve worked as adventurers all this time.

And since Kusama was working for the Word of God religion from the start, that’s an obvious outcome, too.

But what about Ogi, who also worked for the Word of God?

“Who, me? I’m staying put. I was holed up in the elf village for so long that I wouldn’t be much help in a fight anyway.”

Ogi shrugs.

From what I’ve been told, Ogi has a unique skill called “Unlimited Telephone,” which he used to leak information through the elf village barrier to the outside.

He was apparently giving inside info to the Word of God church the whole time.

But he spent long enough in the elf village himself that he wouldn’t be much help to the church now, so he stayed behind.

I think that’s a perfectly fine choice, too.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re all right. Looks like you’ve been busy, too.”

Hyrince looks over my shoulder at the ancient dragon chiefs.

“I’m glad you and Anna are safe, too, Mr. Hyrince.”

I hadn’t seen either of them since I woke up in the elf village.

I'd been especially worried about Anna, since I revived her with my Mercy skill after Kyouya killed her.

Seeing her safe and sound is a big relief.

"Master Schlain, thank you. I owe you my life."

"Not at all. I'm so glad you're safe."

I nod to acknowledge Anna's thanks.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do, I'm sure, but we'll have to save it for later. There's something way more important that might change everything."

Hyrince looks uncharacteristically grim.

Seeing that look on him when he's usually so laid-back tells me that something really serious is happening here.

"What's going on?"

"The evil god isn't the ivory god."

…What does that mean?

We follow the group into the UFO.

There, Hyrince reveals one surprising piece of information after another.

First, he tells us that he's really a part of the ebony god.

Second, they've found out the ivory god isn't the "evil god" from the world quest, although they can't say where this information comes from.

Third, the real evil god is a god called D.

And finally, this D is the creator of the system, and the head administrator who reigns over this world and keeps it running.

There's so much new information that my head is starting to hurt.

Ever since the world quest started, and especially after talking with the pontiff, there have been so many big reveals that my brain can't keep up.

No, I guess that's been going on even before the world quest, since Wakaba and the others told us what was going on…

"At any rate, no matter how things shake out between the ebony and ivory gods, D is planning to destroy half of humanity either way."

Hyrince looks grave as he says this.

"…Isn't there any way to stop that?"

"Yes…there probably is."

I let out a breath of relief at that, although Hyrince's tone still

makes me a bit nervous.

"D is generally fair. She gives everyone a chance. So there is probably some method for preventing this catastrophe, too. Otherwise, she wouldn't bother giving us a warning. But I haven't the slightest idea what that method might be."

Hyrince crosses his arms, furrows his brows, and closes his eyes.

He's right. Without any kind of hint, we really don't even know where to start.

"Pardon me…could we not perhaps turn the tables on this evil god D?"

That's an extreme suggestion, Yuri…

"Impossible."

"We won't know that until we try!"

"Well, then, is there any way a human could stop the sun from falling to the Earth?"

…No, I'd say there's not.

"It's on the same kind of level. Even if the ebony and ivory gods worked together, they wouldn't stand a chance of defeating D."

If someone who's a double of the ebony god is saying that, it must be true.

"So are you saying there's nothing we can do but sit around and wait for it to happen?"

"……"

Hyrince grimaces at my question without a verbal response.

"…Well, if we do not have a hint, we shall just have to ask the mastermind directly."

Elder Ronandt finally speaks up after listening in silence for so long.

"The mastermind?"

Hyrince looks bewildered.

"Indeed. This 'D' is the creator of the system, hrmmm? Surely there must be some considerable connection between creator and creation. We simply follow that connection with Spatial Magic and use it to teleport to wherever D might be."

"But that cannot…no, wait. *Can* you actually do that?"

Hyrince's eyes widen as he looks at the old mage.

In reality, Elder Ronandt did use the familiar-master connection between me and Fei to teleport to where I was.

That must be where he came up with the idea.

"…It is theoretically possible. Why, just look at the explosion in

the other world that brought the reincarnations here. That was caused by a Dimensional Magic master in this world."

"What?!"

There's another unexpected revelation.

I had no idea something like that was behind the incident that caused our reincarnation…

"I suppose…it *could* be done. But it will be incredibly difficult, you realize?"

"Hmph! Who in the world do you think I am, young Hyrince? They call me humanity's strongest mage, and for good reason! I was Julius's teacher, too. Have a little faith, eh?"

"Heh. When you put it that way, I guess I've got no choice but to trust you."

Hyrince's oddly arrogant demeanor, possibly a manifestation of his "ebony god" side, fades back into his usual composure.

Oh, right. I guess since he was a member of Julius's party, he probably knew Elder Ronandt as his teacher for a long time.

I'd completely forgotten.

"I shall begin testing at once whether I can teleport to this 'D.' The rest of you, perhaps you had best tell the pontiff about what we've learned, at the very least. You should be able to get there well enough with this newfangled ship. Now hurry up and put an end to this pointless war!"

On Elder Ronandt's command, everyone jumps into action.

Thus, we began our efforts to counteract the true evil god.

Ariel 2

Using Panoptic Vision to keep an eye on all fronts of the battlefield, I give orders to the taratect monsters by way of Kin Control.

Even if I don't have the strength to fight on the front lines anymore, taking command from the rear is a fine job, too.

In fact, since things are happening all over the enormous Great Elroe Labyrinth, I can't turn off Panoptic Vision even if I wanted to.

Frankly, I'm working my butt off here!

But it seems to be helping, since the battle is definitely leaning in our favor.

Most of the water dragons that were attacking the Upper Stratum have already been dealt with.

I was definitely sweating it out when Iena, the water dragon chief, started leading Sophia around by the nose, but it didn't take long once Wrath came running and tapped into the fight.

Even I was at a loss for words when I saw Iena go down like that.

She was one of the stronger ancient dragon chiefs—the strongest, in fact.

As the supreme ruler of the seas, she could always drown any opponent under the crushing weight of the ocean.

And beyond brute strength, she also excelled at a wide variety of water-based strategies to cunningly keep her enemies right where she wanted them.

Her control over water was breathtaking, and nearly impossible to defend against, since water is a freely flowing liquid.

I once saw Iena fight unbelievably dirty by flooding water into her opponent's body, then tearing them apart from within.

If she gets water into your ears, eyes, or anywhere else, there's nothing you can do.

You'd have to avoid all of that water to defend yourself, which isn't easy to do when she can maneuver it into any shape or direction as she pleases.

Back in my prime, I could've just swallowed it all away with Gluttony. Without a move like that, however, the only way to deal with her would be to dispel or erase the water through brute force.

And to do *that*, you'd have to be more powerful than Iena.

Otherwise, you'd just get swallowed up by the waves.

No one weaker than she was would be able to win, and even someone who's evenly matched would be in for a hard fight.

That was my assessment of Iena, anyway…

So I can't believe she got killed instantly…

I mean, Wrath probably did that because he knew it was his best shot at winning.

He correctly assessed Iena's threat level and chose to end the fight quickly by risking the use of the Wrath skill.

That was the right choice, for sure.

Wrath's fire and lightning wouldn't be very good at defending against Iena's water.

Sophia's ice was much better suited to fighting her.

Since Wrath didn't have a reliable way of blocking Iena's attacks like Sophia did, he would've had a hard time winning if he didn't resort to that strategy.

But still, an insta-kill…

Isn't that a little extreme?

I guess I should just be grateful that the most dangerous of the ancient dragons went down, though.

Still, it's wild that even someone who's lived as long as an ancient dragon chief can still die so abruptly as that.

When you look at it that way, maybe I'm one of the lucky ones, since I at least got to take out Potimas with my own two hands.

I got to fulfill my role, at least to the minimum extent.

The flooding of the Upper Stratum that Iena caused is already being dealt with as Sophia goes around sealing up the holes.

Since she's also defeating any water dragons she finds, the situation in the Upper Stratum will soon be solved.

It looked real bad at first, but when you look at the end result, the enemy lost a ton of their forces while we took minimal damage.

And now…I change my viewpoint to a different area.

The giant pit the queen created leading from the Lower Stratum

to the surface.

An intense battle is unfolding there now.

Fire Dragon Nguyen and Lightning Dragon Gohka, the two ancient dragon chiefs who fought the queen outside, are attacking once again.

And what they're fighting is another queen.

There were originally five queen taratects in total.

White defeated the one that was here in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, while Potimas's weapons brought down another one in the battle of the elf village.

But the other three were still alive and well.

I summoned all three of them for this battle.

One lost her life in battle against Fire Dragon Nguyen and Lightning Dragon Gohka, which means two remain.

And now, one of those two is also battling Nguyen and Gohka.

Incidentally, the one that Julius the Hero defeated in the war against humanity was a clone that White created, not one of the original queens.

These two ancient dragon chiefs have already defeated one queen.

So this will just be a rehash of the same fight, ending with the queen's loss…or so you might think.

Lightning Dragon Gohka thrashes, entangled in the web that was strung up across the pit.

Then the queen assails the trapped dragon mercilessly.

Gohka, who's relatively small for a dragon, is blown away like a piece of garbage.

Nguyen flies around the pit breathing fire, trying to burn up all the spiderwebs, but he clearly can't keep up since Gohka was captured.

A spider monster's strength is using thread in a narrow space.

Since the previous battle was in an open space outside, that queen couldn't fight with her full strength. This battle, though, is another story entirely.

The queen moves nimbly for such an enormous creature, bouncing every whichway around the pit, easily maneuvering whether she's on a wall or in midair.

Aside from the webs she's strung up everywhere, she can also make footholds in the air with Dimensional Maneuvering, leaving both Gohka and Nguyen several steps behind.

On top of that, the queen's underling arch and greater taratects are adding in long-distance attacks from farther down the pit.

And the queen's sticky spider threads prevent the two ancient dragons from reaching the arches and greaters.

Meanwhile, those threads also serve as both shield and scaffolding for the spiders.

Nguyen and Gohka's respective dragon minions have joined the fray, too, only for most of them to get shot down and stuck in spiderwebs.

Since the pit goes from the surface to the Lower Stratum, it's a quick way to get close to the Bottom Stratum here.

But we wouldn't leave a shortcut like that unguarded.

The queen strung up her threads there in advance and was lying in wait to meet any would-be invaders with all her strength.

This pit is a fortress of sorts. An impregnable one.

It gives the queen a home field advantage as well as the help of her minions, and she was already stronger than Nguyen and Gohka in terms of stats.

On top of that, the two dragons had already fought another queen outside.

They must have taken a short break in between, but they can't be fully recovered.

With all those conditions lined up in our favor, this was the natural outcome.

…It's strange, though.

There's no way Dustin wouldn't realize that we'd be guarding the pit, nor that Nguyen and Gohka are on the verge of exhaustion.

Even if the aim was to attack at the same time as Iena and overwhelm us, this still seems like a poor strategy.

I haven't seen the other ancient dragon chiefs yet, and I have no idea why he'd keep them out of play at a time like this.

I'm sure Iena's swift defeat must have been as much of a surprise to them as it was to me. Still, it seems downright reckless for Nguyen and Gohka to rush in like this.

Nguyen is a fire dragon, well-rounded and strong.

His attack and defense are both on a high level, and he has the extra advantage of being able to fight in the air.

But this also means he doesn't stand out on any particular front, so while he can reliably defeat less powerful foes, he inevitably struggles against stronger ones.

He just doesn't have enough firepower.

Which seems silly for a fire dragon.

So while theoretically he's got the type advantage over a queen and should be able to handle it even though his stats are outmatched, the results are as you see now.

As for Gohka, he's kind of a meathead, the total opposite of Nguyen.

His stats are incredibly high, maybe even the strongest of all the ancient dragon chiefs in terms of numbers alone.

In fact, his stats might be on par with the queen's, or even higher.

His skills, on the other hand, are unpolished; he just uses his excessive stats to muscle his way through everything.

That's not really a problem in itself, though.

The power of his stats is so simple that it's difficult to counter.

If you tried to beat him with cheap tricks alone, he'd eat you alive.

Even with strategies that rely on traps and such, he could very well beat you using brute strength before you have time to lure him into them.

At the bare minimum, you've got to be strong enough that you wouldn't die on the spot if he attacks you head-on.

He's got that powerfully destructive lightning as his main attack method, and high enough physical stats to maneuver around quickly and tear apart enemies with his fangs and claws.

It's a simple yet effective method that might rank him first among ancient dragons in terms of raw destructive power.

Although the trade-off for that high output is that he runs out of gas quickly, putting him at a relative disadvantage in longer battles.

That's probably why fighting two queens in a row is clearly taking a toll on Gohka.

Even with a break in between, he didn't have enough time to recover all his SP and such.

I can tell that his movements are already losing their polish.

That's why he got caught in the queen's web so quickly.

…Or maybe it's just because he was jumping around without thinking, as usual.

Gohka is one of those fighters who uses his high speed and small frame for a repeated hit-and-run style of attacking.

Fighting in a pit with threads restricting his movements was

never going to work out well for him in the first place.

I feel like Dustin would've thought of all that, too, so I don't understand why he would send Gohka into a battlefield where he'd have a clear disadvantage.

It makes a little more sense with Nguyen, who at least has the advantage of fire being strong against spider threads.

But if he wanted to use Gohka to his full potential, he should've had him stay out of this fight and get some rest.

There must have been someone who would be better suited to attacking the pit.

If it were me, I probably would've picked Ice Dragon Mia or something.

She'd have the attribute advantage, since her ice can freeze threads, and her specialty is slowly wearing her opponents down with extreme cold and curses.

A strategy like that would force us to go on the move instead.

Which would mean most of the webs set up in the pit would go to waste.

If Nia had shown up, I was afraid I'd have to send in Sophia or Wrath to deal with her, to the point that it feels strange that they didn't pick such an effective strategy.

Is she going to attack from another angle?

Maybe she's even attacking already?

But I don't see anything strange when I scan the entirety of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

So maybe it's going to happen later?

That timing seems way too slow.

We've already repelled Iena's attack, and the queen is winning against Nguyen and Gohka.

The battle is clearly going in our favor.

I can't figure out why Dustin wouldn't send in the rest of the ancient dragon chiefs at this stage.

Am I missing something major here?

Sure, I'd be in trouble if I got hit with a surprise attack in the Bottom Stratum, since I'm alone down here at the moment.

But I don't sense anything coming, and even if it did happen, I could summon the last queen who's guarding the other entrance to the labyrinth right now. That would at least buy enough time for Sophia or Wrath to make it back to me.

No problems here…I think.

Things are going great.

So why can't I shake off this strange feeling of anxiety?

Something has definitely gone wrong on our opponents' side of things.

Since I can't figure out why Dustin would be holding back on his resources this late in the game, the only logical conclusion is that there must have been some kind of change in circumstances that left him with no other choice.

Just like Iena, Nguyen and Gohka are far too valuable to use as throwaway pawns.

It's probably safe to assume that he *can't* make a move if I'm a sitting duck down here and nobody's come after me yet.

Could this mean that the ancient dragon chiefs I haven't seen yet actually broke off from Dustin's side?

That would certainly explain why Nguyen and Gohka are attacking so recklessly.

If they're his only game pieces left, he'd have no choice but to attack with them, even if it doesn't make sense.

In which case, the reason he sent these two in not long after they defeated the first queen was probably because he figured he had to pile on the attacks while Iena was still alive.

Although in point of fact, Iena had already been beaten by then, rendering Nguyen and Gohka's reckless attack on this front fairly pointless.

If Iena, Nguyen, and Gohka were the only ones who stayed with Dustin, they don't stand a chance at winning anymore.

Iena is gone, and Nguyen and Gohka can't break through our defenses alone.

If he's still got the other ancient dragon chiefs on hand somewhere, that would be another story, but I really don't see why he would be holding out at this point…

The moment when Iena and the other water dragons attacked the Upper Stratum would've been the best time to attack. With that window of opportunity closed, all that accomplished was losing a major player like Iena for no good reason.

So the theory that the rest of the chiefs abandoned ship makes the most sense. Why would they do that, though?

Well, I can kinda see Nia bailing.

She's always been a shut-in anyway.

But Hyuvan and Reise? That makes less sense.

Hyuvan has a strong sense of duty and always carries out orders faithfully, despite his ridiculous demeanor.

And Reise is so loyal that he let himself be sealed away all by himself to protect the Sword of the Demon Lord.

It's a little hard to believe that he would leave Gülie's faction.

If he did, I'm guessing something really serious must've gone down on their end.

The scary part is, I have no idea what that could be.

Does this mean something is happening elsewhere that's so important it could have a huge effect on our side, too?

Something that would cause loyal dragons like Hyuvan and Reise to secede?

…Okay, if that's true, it *can't* be anything good.

And it'll be tough to figure anything out from way down here, where I'm not getting any information from the outside world.

That doesn't mean I can just up and leave now, though.

It wouldn't be wise to change our course of action based on nothing but a vague suspicion.

We've got to stick to our guns.

Focus all of our efforts on defending the Great Elroe Labyrinth to the bitter end.

Whatever might have happened to throw a wrench in the other side's plans may just work out in our favor, anyway.

I've got to concentrate on commanding my own army.

Still, at this point, we've just about clinched it.

Things were already going well for our side, and now the puppet taratects have arrived.

That's four puppet taratects along with the queen.

Not to mention nine arch taratects and plenty of smaller spider monsters, too.

On the other hand, Nguyen and Gohka's side only has two ancient fire dragons and one ancient lightning dragon left.

The others have all been defeated already.

They were a match for us in terms of legendary-class monsters, but otherwise our defenses were just too strong.

Now that the puppet taratects have arrived, Nguyen and Gohka have zero chance of turning things around, when they couldn't even handle the queen and her underlings alone.

Nguyen must realize that.

Not sure about that meathead Gohka, though.

Their best option here would be to retreat…but will they?

Nguyen howls.

Even though I can't hear it as I watch through my Panoptic Vision, I can feel the forceful drive behind it.

He burns up the threads around him with fiery breath and fights back against the puppet taratects as they descend on him.

So he's not gonna run.

I guess that proves that their side has their backs against the wall.

If the other ancient dragon chiefs were still on standby, that would mean Dustin is doling out his forces in piecemeal attacks, sending them in one by one only to get destroyed.

There's no way he would do something so stupid.

It makes more sense to assume that Nguyen isn't retreating because he knows there'd be no coming back if he did.

At this point, I have to assume that the other ancient dragon chiefs really did defect.

Their only remaining option was for Nguyen and Gohka to break through the queen's defenses in the pit.

But we're not nice enough to just sit back and let them do that.

The puppet taratects assault Nguyen from all sides, moving in perfect sync.

A fiery breath attack shoots from Nguyen's mouth toward one of them—Ael.

She produces poisonous liquid to cancel it out.

Since he's stronger and has the attribute advantage over her, Nguyen's attack wins out, and Ael gets blown back by the fiery breath.

But the other three attack Nguyen in the meantime.

Their six sword-wielding arms slash away at Nguyen's tough scales.

That's three of them with six arms each, for a total of eighteen attacks at once.

Since Nguyen's stats are higher, a single attack doesn't leave a very deep cut—but it's not shallow enough to ignore, either.

Eighteen of them at once is enough to deal some major damage to his HP.

In evident pain, Nguyen produces fire from his entire body in a last-ditch effort to drive them away, which only proves their attack did enough damage to make him cautious.

Ael, Sael, Riel, and Fiel.

These four puppet taratects are my elite force.

The puppet taratect species is exclusive to individuals handpicked by me. It can't be reached through the normal taratect evolution tree.

But their numbers have been greatly reduced, and now only these four remain.

The rest of the puppet taratects fell in battle.

(Let's not talk about the fact that it was White who took out most of them.)

These four elites who survived all that are the best of the best.

It helps that they were already particularly strong compared to the others, which is why I kept them out of that fight as my bodyguards.

That's why they survived getting slaughtered by White.

And they've continued to survive even throughout this final battle.

Sure, they haven't grown as quickly as reincarnations like Sophia and Wrath—even Merazophis has grown faster.

But they've definitely become more powerful by surviving so many fights.

I don't just mean in obvious ways like higher stats and more skills, either.

Their techniques and teamwork have grown, too, in ways that numbers alone can't convey.

These four are the puppet taratects who have survived it all.

And they've spent more time together than any of the others did, too.

No one can top their teamwork.

They cover for each other and fight in harmony without ever using Telepathy or anything of the sort, like their hearts are beating as one.

Riel and Fiel use their threads to catch Ael and bring her back right away.

Ael looks a little scorched on the surface, but the puppet taratects' real bodies are the tiny spiders hidden inside their doll-like exteriors.

Damaging the outside won't kill them as long as the spider at the core is safe.

With Ael and the other two brought together, Sael is left alone

on the opposite side.

Nguyen notices this right away and goes after her.

But the other three puppet taratects leap at his back.

Nguyen senses them coming and flips around to fend them off.

Then Sael promptly takes that opening to attack.

Her sword slices up Nguyen's wing.

In this four-against-one fight, they're able to conquer Nguyen even though he's stronger and has an attribute that's their biggest weakness.

Now Gohka flies toward the puppet taratects, maybe in an attempt to rescue Nguyen.

But he can't catch them.

They run along the threads or swing on them, zipping around in all directions.

This strange movement is harder to follow than any normal flight, making it hard for Gohka to keep up, even though his stats are higher.

Almost no one can catch the puppet taratects in a space like this, where they can use threads to their full advantage, except maybe someone like Hyuvan, the fastest of the ancient dragons.

And once Gohka stops moving, the threads wrap around him.

He only froze for a second, unsure which of the puppet taratects to chase when they split up into two groups.

That was long enough for his body to get wound up in thread.

And then the thread starts to cut into him.

Gohka surrounds himself with lightning, burning the threads away so he can escape.

But he still sustains some major scratches, unable to completely get away in time.

Nguyen uses his fiery Breath to stop them from attacking any further, but the puppet taratects are at a clear advantage.

They're not just winning because they work together so well—it's also because Nguyen and Gohka aren't working together well at all.

Nguyen can't keep up with Gohka's speedy movements, and it would never occur to Gohka to try to match pace with Nguyen.

That Gohka really is a meathead, after all…

So instead of four-against-two, it's more like four-against-one-and-one.

On top of that, supporting fire from the queen and her brood

makes it even harder for Nguyen and Gohka to get anywhere.

The queen is the biggest threat of all, and the two dragons can't just ignore her.

But do they really think they can keep an eye on the queen's movements while also fighting the puppet taratects?

They're overestimating the queen and the puppets both.

The puppet taratects all fire Dark Magic spells at once.

Nguyen and Gohka weave left and right to avoid the attacks, only to suddenly stop in midair.

Looks of alarm arise on both their faces.

They've been captured in threads too fine to be seen by the naked eye.

While the two of them were busy fighting the puppet taratects, the queen carefully surrounded them with threads without their noticing.

How could they have picked up on it, when they were battling four elite fighters while also trying to keep an eye out for the queen?

And even those thin threads are strong enough to stop Nguyen and Gohka from moving for a moment.

The puppet taratects' Dark Magic spells hit their marks.

Magic isn't very effective against dragons, thanks to their Dragon Scales line of skills.

But it's not nothing, either.

The spells stab at the dragons' scales, damaging them.

Then the puppet taratects are close behind.

Tangled up in threads and still recovering from a barrage of spells, Nguyen and Gohka can't fight back against the puppet taratects' attacks.

They're unable to dodge or defend themselves as the four fighters with six arms attack, for a total of twenty-four slashes.

Nguyen and Gohka are soon covered in wounds, dripping blood everywhere.

It's hopeless for them now.

Still, these are two supreme rulers of the powerful ancient dragons.

Fierce flames rise from Nguyen's body, while Gohka is wreathed in purple lightning.

The puppet taratects are too close to dodge in time.

Direct hits from fire and lightning turn the puppet taratects into

ash…or at least, their marionette bodies.

But their real bodies leap out of the puppets, unbeknownst to Nguyen and Gohka.

Four palm-size spiders whirl through the air.

The threads they control take on a cutting edge and slice through the two dragons' bodies.

Remember, the puppet taratects' exteriors are just that: puppets.

Though they serve as both armor and weapons for the tiny spiders inside, you could also say they're nothing more than that.

The puppet taratects' tiny true forms might look weak, but they retain all of their stats and skills, not the puppet bodies.

In other words, even at that size, they still have stats in the ten thousands.

They're plenty strong even without their puppet bodies.

Now their Cutting Thread attacks prove to be the finishing blow.

Nguyen and Gohka are no longer moving.

Since their bodies are still caught up in threads, they go limp in midair as if crucified.

Nguyen's mouth moves slightly, and his body dissolves into dust.

Seeing this, Gohka says something as well, and his body does the same.

…They offered themselves up to the system.

I wasn't very close with either of them.

But we certainly knew each other for a very long time.

Now those old, familiar acquaintances are gone.

Though I feel some sadness at this loss, it also tells me in no uncertain terms that the end is finally near.

After a moment of respectful silence for Nguyen and Gohka, who fought bravely until the very end, I give a few words of thanks for the puppet taratects.

"You did great."

Not that they can hear me from so far away, but it's the feelings that count here.

The puppet taratects are looking sadly at the charred remains of their puppet bodies.

White made those bodies especially for them.

They were far from ordinary puppets: visually indistinguishable from real humans, thanks to White's impressive thread work.

I wouldn't be able to remake them to nearly the same quality.

So I'd like to have White remake them, although I'm not sure if there will be time after this battle is over.

"She'd better come back safe for all of our sakes, including the puppet taratects'."

I utter a prayer for White, who's still locked in battle.

Just then…

"Testing, testing, one-two-three. Hello? Can you hear me?"

A voice suddenly echoes in my head.

Is this…Telepathy?

I don't sense anyone nearby.

They must be sending this message from outside the labyrinth.

That would take a seriously high skill level.

The Word of God church has quite a few high-level Telepathy users, and stations them in most towns and cities to create a sort of telephone network. That's how the Word of God headquarters gathers information from all over the world.

If this person is skilled enough to reach me all the way at the bottom of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, they've got to be one of the church's trained Telepathy specialists.

"Who is this? Someone from the Word of God, I assume."

"Hello? Hi. You're half right, I guess. Oh, this is our first time talking, so I guess I should say nice to meet you. Although we've technically seen each other before. I'm Kenichi Ogiwara, one of the reincarnations. I've got a unique skill called 'Unlimited Telephone,' you see."

This telepathic message was about to turn the entire situation upside down.

Dustin

A grim atmosphere settles over the military headquarters.

The situation is bleak.

Our other headquarters that we had set up near the battlefield was attacked and destroyed by white-robed agents.

As for the battle itself, while we managed to defeat the queen taratect, thanks to great efforts from Chief Nguyen and Chief Gohka, the swarm of Nightmare's Vestiges that appeared partway through dealt major losses to both the human alliance and the demon army, ultimately driving them to retreat.

Of course, I never had high expectations for the human nor demon armies.

Given the strength of Lady Ariel's main forces, it would be foolish to even count them among our assets.

But she couldn't just ignore them if they all attacked at once, either.

She would have to send some of her forces to deal with them, and if Chief Iena's assault went well in the meantime, the next steps would be a little bit easier…or so I hoped.

Yet I have already lost contact with Lady Iena.

I had one of my Panoptic Vision users try to investigate the Upper Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, only to find it frozen as far as the eye could see.

I did not truly expect to submerge the entire labyrinth, but I still hoped that Chief Iena's power would be enough to eliminate one or two of the enemy's strongest players.

At the very least, I believed she would be able to buy us a fair amount of time.

But if the Upper Stratum has been frozen over so quickly, that must mean Lady Iena was defeated after almost no time at all.

My original plan was to wait for Chief Nguyen and Chief Gohka to recover while Lady Iena kept some of the enemy's main forces occupied, or to perhaps even defeat them, allowing us to go on the offensive.

Since Lady Iena was defeated instead, I was forced to speed those plans along and send in Chief Nguyen and Chief Gohka right away, only for both of them to fall as well.

At this point, we no longer stand a chance of conquering the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Chief Hyuvan, Chief Nia, and Chief Reise simply left too large a void behind.

All we can do now is pray for Lord Black Dragon's victory.

And now, in the midst of this situation, I received a report from one of the reincarnations—Kenichi Ogiwara—that somehow made everything even worse.

"Are you certain this is true?"

"Would I lie about something like this? That would be an awful thing to joke about."

I did not actually think young Ogiwara was lying, of course.

Perhaps it was just that I so desperately wanted it to be false that I could not help asking.

I know that Ogiwara is not the sort to lie at a time like this.

He has an advanced form of telepathy called "Unlimited Telephone," and used this skill to leak information to me from the elf village for many years.

Though we only met in person once, to register me as a contact for his Unlimited Telephone skill, I know him quite well through our regular conversations.

"At this rate, the evil god is going to wipe out half of humanity no matter which side wins."

Despite myself, I put a hand to my forehead and groan.

I cannot believe that we would receive such terrible news when we've just reached the point that our side can only pray for the ebony god's victory.

If this information had come just a little sooner, perhaps we would not have lost chiefs Iena, Nguyen, and Gohka in vain.

"Ah, hang on a second, please… There! It's all set up! I'm switching this to a group call!"

After those words, my mind is filled with noise.

It's as if I can hear several people breathing all at once.

“What’s this?”

“Hrm? Is that you, Dustin?”

The voice I hear next belongs to Lady Ariel.

“It’s a group call. An ability of mine that allows multiple people to have a telepathic conversation at the same time.”

“You can do such a thing?”

“It’s not like I was hiding it on purpose. It just never really came up.”

Evidently, this “group call” uses Ogiwara as a conduit to allow several people to communicate via telepathy.

I never imagined that I would speak to Lady Ariel again, let alone like this.

But my senses tell me there are others besides Lady Ariel connected to this call.

“Okay, sooo…I guess let’s start by having everyone introduce themselves one at a time, when I say your name. Shun, you go first.”

“Oh, sure. Um, I’m Schlain, a reincarnation and the current Hero. Please call me Shun. Thank you for having me.”

“Wow, so formal.”

“Shut up, Ogi.”

The first to be introduced is Sir Schlain.

So it was his group that supplied the information about the evil god, then.

He did decide to pursue the unlikely hope of making both the ebony and ivory gods’ wishes come true, after all.

Perhaps it took a soul like his to find out the truth.

Someone who refused to give up or compromise until the very end.

“Next, Mr. Hyrince.”

“Right. My name is Hyrince Quarto. But at this point, maybe I should introduce myself as a double of Güliedistodiez, the ebony god. I’ll be participating in this meeting from that position, anyway. Thanks.”

Sir Hyrince is the next to speak.

He was a member of the previous hero Sir Julius’s party, and of the current hero Schlain’s as well.

But just as he says, we ought to treat him as a double of the ebony god now.

Most of the ebony god’s doubles live their entire lives as ordinary humans, never revealing their second identity until the very end unless extreme circumstances require it.

His primary aim is to experience life from a purely human point of view.

That he is making an exception to participate in this meeting is additional proof that what's happening is of the utmost importance.

"Okay, next! Our teacher, Ms. Oka…I mean, Miss Filimøs!"

"Ogiwara, did you really forget my name just now?"

"I mean, you've always been Ms. Oka to us, sooo…"

"Ogi, Ms. Oka, now isn't the time for that sort of thing."

This familiar exchange goes to show how close the reincarnations were in their previous lives.

Our world did them a grave disservice by tearing them apart and plunging them into chaos.

And the fact that we must now depend on their help only further emphasizes how inadequate we residents of this world truly are.

We should all be ashamed.

"Hello, my name is Filimøs. I am a reincarnation and former teacher to the others, which is why many of them call me by my prior name, Ms. Oka. I am pleased to meet you all."

Miss Filimøs is the elf reincarnation, I believe.

After the massacre at the elf village, she is likely the only survivor of their race.

That may lead to many complications if she survives after this battle, but I suppose now is not the time to concern myself with such things.

"All right, let's keep it moving. Next! Chief Reise, representing the ancient dragons."

"I am Reise the dark dragon. A pleasure."

Hrm.

If Chief Reise can participate in this meeting, that means that Ogiwara has met them before.

One of the caveats of Ogiwara's Unlimited Telephone is that he can only connect and converse with individuals he has met in person.

In other words, since Chief Reise joined up with Sir Schlain, Ogiwara must be with them right now.

"Next, Pontiff Dustin of the Word of God religion."

Ah, my turn has come.

"I am Dustin, the pontiff of the Word of God. Thank you for having me, everyone."

Most likely, they are all familiar with me through the world quest speeches.

It would thus be pointless to introduce myself at great length.

"Finally, Miss Ariel, the Demon Lord."

"Hey, I'm Demon Lord Ariel. Let's do this."

Lady Ariel sounds rather sullen in her short introduction.

I suppose that, too, is inevitable, given that everyone else here is technically her enemy.

"And I'm Kenichi Ogiwara, the reincarnation using this group call to connect everyone. I'm just here to link you all up, so I'll leave the rest of the proceedings to Mr. Hyrince."

"Thanks. Let's get right down to business, then. As I believe you've all heard from Ogiwara, this is about the evil god plotting to sacrifice half of humanity, as described in the world quest. We all assumed it was referring to the ivory god at first, but thanks to certain information, it's now clear that we were wrong. The real evil god is Administrator D, the creator of the system who outranks the ebony god."

"Might I ask a question? Who provided this information? And are we quite certain we can trust it?"

"I'm afraid I can't reveal the source of the information. It's not that I refuse—it's simply not possible. Additionally, if anyone does figure out who may have provided the information, please keep it to yourself and don't tell anyone else. I hope that answers your question."

Hyrince responds immediately to my question.

…I see.

So he cannot reveal the source, even if he wanted to.

Since we must also refrain from mentioning it if we figure out the source, that probably means there's some sort of restriction involved.

And the person at this meeting most likely to be under such a restriction is Miss Filimøs.

Considering how quickly Potimas was able to collect the reincarnations, outpacing even our church, it's clear that Miss Filimøs has an information-gathering skill of some kind.

And if she is the source of this particular revelation, it would explain why she is present at this meeting.

"As for the veracity of the information, I personally believe it is true beyond a doubt."

"I see. If you of all people feel so strongly about it, I shall take you at your word."

It would be best to assume that this information is true if Sir Hyrince, a double of the ebony god, believes it so confidently.

I would suspect anyone else of being deceived, but the ebony god has lived far longer than even I have, keeping watch over and protecting this world.

As a part of that ebony god, Sir Hyrince could never be deceived about a threat to our world.

"Unfortunately, all we know for certain is that the evil god is D. There is no indication as to how we might prevent the destruction of half of humanity. And if I may speak on behalf of the ebony god, if D intends to stand in our way as an enemy, then we have no hope of fighting back."

D is the being who created the system: a god far stronger than the ebony god, and the savior of our world.

Since this planet survives thanks solely to the system, that means D could destroy the world just as easily as save it.

There is no question of who is stronger when D already holds all of our lives over a barrel.

"Therefore, we've concluded that the only way to do anything about this information is to attempt to make contact with D first. And so, the Spatial Magic master Elder Ronandt is currently searching for a way to teleport to D's location."

Hrmmm…

The ebony god has already lost all hope of conquering the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Perhaps it would be best to give up on that matter and meet with Sir Hyrince and company instead.

I have no choice but to cooperate with them if the alternative is sitting and waiting for half of humanity to be destroyed.

But even if we on the ebony god's side feel that way, the problem is whether the ivory god's side will agree…

"So? What do you want us to do about it? You realize I'm still fighting to kill half of humanity either way, right? I'm not gonna change my plans at this point just because of something like that."

Of course…

Lady Ariel has a point.

The ivory god's side already intended to destroy half of humanity.

Whether D does it or not is none of their concern.

This doesn't change the victory conditions for Lady Ariel's side;

thus, they can simply continue to defend the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Though she will probably not actively hinder us, we cannot expect her to help, either.

Of course, since we are currently enemies, I could not ask her to do such a thing anyway.

"…About that, Ariel. I don't suppose you could open up a path to the system core for us?"

"Excuse me?"

Lady Ariel's voice takes on a dangerous edge in response to Sir Hyrince's words.

Even through telepathy, it is intense enough to give one goose bumps.

"And why would I do that?"

"It's the most reliable way to attempt teleporting to D's location. D created the system, and controls it personally. By us directly accessing the core of the system, the chances of successfully teleporting to D would be much higher."

Hyrince's statement does make sense in theory.

But whether Lady Ariel will accept it or not is another story.

"Don't make me laugh. We wouldn't gain anything from going along with this."

The ebony god's side wants to save humanity, while the ivory god's side does not.

And since the ivory god has to prevent anyone from entering the system core at the heart of the Great Elroe Labyrinth in order to be victorious in this battle, Hyrince's request is an impossible one.

I am sure he is aware of this as well.

So why would he make such a request, knowing it would be rejected?

"I beg you to reconsider."

"No thanks."

"At this rate, half of humanity will be destroyed. Not just death—utter destruction."

Hyrince's words, and the urgency behind them, make everything clear to me.

Not just death…utter destruction.

In other words, their very souls would vanish.

From our perspective on the ebony god's side, we ought to focus all our energy on stopping D, not the ivory god's side.

For the ivory god's side, the death of half of humanity is not the

goal, but a natural result of their endeavors. For the evil god D, however, this seems to be the sole intention.

Death and destruction are similar, yet there is a major difference.

If one's soul is destroyed, one can no longer be reborn.

We must deal with D, whose plans would cause far greater damage.

The best way to improve our chances to this end would be to convince Lady Ariel to let us into the system's core, where one with ruler authority could connect to the administrator and create a higher rate of success for teleportation.

Teleporting to the unknown location of D, whom Elder Ronandt has not even met, is far beyond the limits of any skill.

I cannot imagine success is likely, even for humanity's strongest mage.

From the point of view of the ebony god's side, we must persuade Lady Ariel no matter what.

But Lady Ariel's answer is point-blank.

"That doesn't matter to me one bit."

There seems to be no hope of changing her mind.

I cannot blame her.

Allowing someone into the system's core could directly result in the ivory god's side's defeat.

I or someone else with ruler authority might very well take that opportunity to prevent the system's destruction.

If anything, that would be the most logical course of action.

After all, the people who want to go to the system's core are the leader of the ebony god's side and another group with similar values.

They want to save everyone without sacrificing half of humanity.

"I understand that this would not benefit you. And yet the survival of humanity hangs in the balance. Is there any way we can convince you to help us?"

"Yeah, right. What kind of idiot would let the enemy waltz right into their headquarters?"

"We would of course promise not to do anything in the system core other than teleporting to D's location."

"I don't believe that for a second."

We are at an impasse.

“I’ve always made tons of compromises. And look where that got us. I refuse to compromise anymore.”

Lady Ariel’s assertion is understandable.

And it is difficult to argue.

Look at the way this world’s people mistreated Lady Sariel: using MA energy despite her warnings of its dangers, incurring the wrath of the dragons, letting her defend us from them, only to sacrifice her in order to keep this world alive.

Amid all these irredeemable transgressions, it is small wonder that Lady Ariel and the others who counted Lady Sariel as family would be furious.

And yet Lady Ariel has restrained her anger for so long.

Just as she says, she has compromised with us many times over.

It is simply too much to ask her to compromise yet again.

She has no reason to go along with our request.

Trying to appeal to her emotions because half of humanity is going to be destroyed will not move Lady Ariel’s heart when we have ignored Lady Sariel’s suffering for so long.

If anything, the more we try to move her, the more irritated she is likely to become.

What right do we have?

After we asked so much of Lady Sariel, and whittled away at her life for so long, how can we turn around and demand even more?

I am sure that is how it sounds to Lady Ariel.

It is impossible to persuade her.

And yet we must, or else either Elder Ronandt will have to find a way to teleport to D’s location on his own, or we will need to attack the Great Elroe Labyrinth once again.

We cannot count on Elder Ronandt’s success.

And now that we have lost chiefs Iena, Nguyen, and Gohka, it would be difficult to break through into the depths of the labyrinth even with the aid of the remaining dragon chiefs.

None of these options are feasible.

They are all just as impossible as convincing Lady Ariel to help.

Isn’t there any way out of this mess…?

“Excuse me…”

Just then, Sir Schlain breaks his silence.

“Please, I’m begging you to reconsider, too! I swear we won’t do anything that would put the ivory god’s side at a disadvantage!”

For just a moment, I hoped perhaps a reincarnation would be able to convince Lady Ariel, but a simple, honest plea is hardly enough to change her mind.

"Yamada, you reincarnations throwing your hat in the ring doesn't change my answer."

"No, listen! At this rate, half of humanity will be gone forever!"

"If I must repeat myself again, our side was already fighting with the full intention of slaughtering half of humanity. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't make much of a difference whether they die or get destroyed."

"But that's awful…!"

It appears Sir Schlain will not be able to persuade Lady Ariel, either.

"Yamada, this battle concerns our *world. You reincarnations are outsiders. Don't try and get involved if you're not prepared to face the consequences."*

If anything, now she's the one talking *him* down.

"…I'd prefer if you didn't treat us like outsiders. Yes, maybe we were born in another world. But we live in this one now, and we're going to go on living here. We're not interlopers. This concerns us, too. At the very least, I know I'm here because I'm prepared to be part of this."

…Now, there's a surprise.

Sir Schlain, who seemed at first like he would be cowed into silence by Lady Ariel, was able to make a surprisingly firm comeback.

So this is the younger brother of Sir Julius the Hero.

Though he is still young and naive, I can see now that he has truly inherited the will of his predecessor.

"…Gotcha. Sorry for being so dismissive, then."

It appears that Lady Ariel was caught slightly off guard by Sir Schlain's words as well.

In that short exchange, her perception of the young hero has likely improved from someone not worth her time to someone she can address on equal terms.

"But that still doesn't mean we're going to go along with your demands."

Unfortunately, that still isn't enough to change the situation at hand.

"Erm, excuse me, may I pose a question? Why do you suppose this 'D' is going to destroy half of humanity, exactly?"

This time, Miss Filimøs speaks up.

I can understand her misgivings.

While Lady Ariel's side has a goal that they wish to accomplish even if it means taking countless lives in the process, D has no such clear reason.

In fact, we know next to nothing about D at all.

I myself do not understand D's thoughts or goals in the slightest.

This, too, is something we likely cannot say for certain unless we ask D directly.

"Who knows? Not me, that's for sure. White and Gülie are the only ones who've met D face-to-face. But from what I've heard, I wouldn't be surprised if it's mostly just for fun."

"For fun?! Destroying half of humanity for fun?!"

Despite Sir Schlain's evident shock, I do not find it overly surprising.

Any being powerful enough to create something as anomalous as the system is bound to see things differently from mere humans like us.

Although Lord Black Dragon is closely linked with humanity, the rest of the dragons were quite willing to eradicate every one of us.

We must not forget that.

To a god, mankind is little more than rubbish.

"Yes, I imagine it is at least in part just for fun. D sees this world as nothing but a toy for her amusement. I'm sure she could have saved this planet without a roundabout method like the system if she really wanted to."

Mr. Hyrince is right.

This world is only a toybox to D.

She forced humans and demons to war against each other, added monsters into the mix, and watched mankind struggle and fight to survive.

When I think of it that way, it makes perfect sense to call someone so cruel an evil god.

But it is true nonetheless that this planet has escaped destruction, thanks to the system.

We toys cannot rebel against our owner.

"Erm, if this person really is that powerful, does that mean she might be able to grant both the ivory god's and the ebony god's wishes? Think about it! Maybe we can talk to her face-to-face and convince

her!"

Sir Schlain speaks with the conviction of someone who's had a brilliant idea.

True enough, I am sure D does have the power to do so.

However, that would be…

"So you're depending on gods again?"

I can sense Lady Ariel's immense anger even through telepathy.

As I suspected, Sir Schlain's proposal struck a nerve with her.

"You can't do it yourselves, so you turn to a god. How'd that work out for this world last time, huh?"

We humans turned to Lady Sariel for help, and even now, we continue to repay her kindness with cruelty.

For Lady Ariel, who is striving to save her, asking a god for help is unthinkable.

"…I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me."

"If you weren't a reincarnation, I'd probably kill you where you stand."

Her threat sounds serious enough that cold sweat runs down my back.

It drives home the depth of the rift between our side and hers all over again.

Though we understand each other's words, we can never understand each other's feelings.

I am sure it seems that way to Lady Ariel as well.

If anything, she seems to believe even more strongly that we cannot agree.

Humanity has betrayed Lady Sariel for so long after all.

Perhaps trying to persuade Lady Ariel any longer would only be wasting our time.

"That won't do at all, Hero. We've got to win this on our own, or it won't be worth anything. Besides, from what I've seen of our world all this time, D's not likely to do us any favors."

Chief Reise chimes in with an easygoing drawl.

I can easily picture them shrugging languidly as they speak.

"Yes, I agree. D seems to cherish fairness, from what I can tell. If we make such a request of D, she will expect something of equal value in exchange. When Güliedistodiez asked her to save this planet, she created the system and ordered us to save it with our own sweat and blood. And we have no way of paying the price she would demand this time."

If fairness is truly important to her, is this her way of evening

the playing field in spite of her divinity?

Placing limits on herself because she could otherwise do anything she wanted?

Of course, knowing that would not help us negotiate when we have nothing to offer, just as Sir Hyrince said.

But if she truly values fairness, then perhaps…

"This could be D's method of divine punishment."

I blurt out the thought through telepathy as soon as it strikes me.

"Even if the ivory god's side loses, mankind will still pay for their crimes. Perhaps she decided that this would be the fairest outcome, from a god's perspective, and that is why she issued the world quest."

If that were the case, perhaps we should simply resign ourselves and accept our punishment.

The thought drains all energy from my body.

All this time, I have worked tirelessly to defend humanity, no matter the cost.

But in truth this was merely stubbornness: I felt that since we betrayed Lady Ariel, we must commit to that stance until the bitter end.

And as a result, divine judgment has deemed that humanity must be punished.

Which means…all this time, I've just been…

"I cannot deny the possibility, but it is still a mystery why D decided to create the world quest. The only way to find out is to ask her directly. We cannot waste our time on pointless theories and conjecture. Let's continue the discussion."

At Sir Hyrince's words, I pull myself together.

Although I am not sure what else there is to discuss, since it seems we cannot come to an agreement…

"…Hyrince, Dustin, that Ronandt fellow, and any interested reincarnations. Ah, and throw in Balto as a representative of demonkind. I will allow those people, and only those people, to enter."

Just as I was about to give up, Lady Ariel makes a proposal that I can scarcely believe.

"…Are you sure?"

"Isn't this exactly what you people wanted?"

It is, and yet I am utterly bewildered.

Lady Ariel has no reason to accept our pleas.

Just as she told us multiple times, the ivory god's side need do

nothing but continue to focus on defending the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

There is no need for her to allow us inside.

Lady Ariel's offer is all risk and no reward for her faction.

I can understand why she excluded the other ancient dragon chiefs.

They are the only ones who can stand up to the ivory god's forces at this point.

But even if we do not pose much of a threat in battle, it is still dangerous to allow those of us with ruler authority to enter the core of the system.

The ivory god's side's conditions for victory are that the ivory god herself must win, and they must prevent anyone from entering the system's core to prevent its destruction.

Only those with ruler authority can stop the system from being destroyed.

If she allows anyone with that authority to enter the core, they could easily do just that.

"Does this mean you have decided to trust us?"

"Of course not. How could I possibly trust you? It's just that I wouldn't mind meeting D and having a few words with her myself."

If she is acting on her own desires instead of trusting us, that does somewhat explain her change of heart.

Though I still cannot understand why she would allow such a risky venture.

"Thank you."

Still, it is an incredibly fortunate turn of events for us.

Even if this is a trap and I am to be killed, there is nothing else that the ebony god's side can do.

My life would be a small sacrifice to make.

"I'll be waiting in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, then."

Hyrince

As if things weren't already difficult enough…

I can feel my stomach tightening with nerves.

Why do I have to take on such a major role in the proceedings…?

While it's true that I'm a double of Güliedistodiez, I've lived my whole life as Hyrince, and I intended to continue doing so until the end.

Güliedistodiez's doubles don't have an important part to play.

For him, it's basically just a fun little change of pace.

Like playing out the fantasy of living an entire life as an average human.

So that's how I've lived my life, too.

Although I guess you couldn't exactly call me "average," since I was the hero's childhood friend and later his party member.

Even so, as Hyrince, I always expected to defend Julius and "go out in a blaze of glory!"

But that all changed when the so-called reincarnations showed up.

I know this is an awful thing to say, but it's definitely crossed my mind a few times that things wouldn't have gotten so complicated if it weren't for those reincarnations.

But of course, the war between humans and demons might have been even worse without them, and we probably wouldn't have been able to defeat Potimas.

The pluses and minuses are so extreme that it's hard to say which way would've been better.

I will say, however, that the reincarnations are entirely to blame for this "world quest" business.

And by reincarnations, I specifically mean White.

In other words, White is the root of all evil.

“It looks like we’re all here.”

“You’re gonna be the guide, Kyouya?”

All internal monologuing aside, I’m currently in front of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Wrath, one of the members of the ivory god’s side, stands waiting for us.

He’s a reincarnation, too, isn’t he…?

In fact, there are more reincarnations here than not, even though this is about the fate of our world. Seems wrong, doesn’t it?

There are four people here native to this world.

The pontiff, Elder Ronandt, Balto representing the demons, and me.

On the other hand, there are six reincarnations: Shun, Katia, Fei, Yuri, Ms. Oka, and Prince Hugo.

Aside from Shun and Hugo, the rest are all lovely ladies.

What is this, a harem?

The girls are clearly all gathering toward Shun, not Hugo.

Sure, Julius was popular, too, but they weren’t all hanging off him like this, dammit.

“So. What’s the deal with that girl, Shun?”

“Huh?”

Wrath points to someone past Shun’s back.

It’s Shun’s half-sister, Sue, hiding behind the rest of the group.

“Sue?! I told you not to follow me, didn’t I?!”

“But, Brotheeer!”

While Shun looks sincerely distressed, Sue is on the verge of tears.

The worst part is that I can tell she’s also trying to look cute, and stealing glances to see if it’s working on Shun or not.

“…I guess one extra tagalong is fine. But if you try anything funny, I will cut you down. You’d better keep that in mind.”

I discreetly let out a sigh of relief at Wrath’s words.

If we angered the ivory god’s side and they called the whole thing off, we’d be out of options.

We’re lucky Wrath was willing to bend on that.

The pontiff looks pale, evidently harboring similar concerns.

Does little miss Sue know that her selfishness could have altered the fate of the world?

…Nah, she couldn’t.

If she knew that, surely she wouldn't have done it…right…?

It's all too easy to imagine her saying something like, "I'll stay with my brother even if it means the end of the world!"

I'm begging you, think about the bigger picture here…

Urk, my stomach hurts.

I feel like I'm going to cough up blood…

"Shun. Keep a close eye on Sue and make sure she doesn't make any wrong moves. Just so you know, they could probably kill all of us without our being able to fight back."

My stats are still well within the range of human capability.

Since I trained and fought with Julius, I imagine I'm on the strong side for a human, but that doesn't make a bit of difference in this battle.

Here, you would have to be far beyond the realm of human strength to even be considered a part of the fight.

Even Elder Ronandt, who seems more powerful than any human should be, isn't exponentially stronger than the limit, by any means.

He would probably struggle against even a lesser dragon, never mind an ancient one.

Every major player in this battle is at least as strong as an ancient dragon, so those of us whose strength is firmly in the "human" category would just get blown away as soon as we set foot on the battlefield.

Although I am a double of Güliedistodiez, I don't have any special abilities of my own. I'd be blown away with the rest of them.

So why am I stuck marching right into the middle of enemy territory as some kind of representative of the ebony god's side?

Urgh. Give me a break…

"Kyouya…"

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not going to hurt anyone as long as you don't do anything to force my hand."

"He's right. The ivory army doesn't need to let us in, so we know this isn't a trap. Since they're doing this on good faith, we've got to make sure we show them the same. Don't be nervous."

I pat Shun's shoulder as I comfort him, though I'm mostly saying it to reassure myself.

It's not that I'm afraid to die here.

I should have lost my life along with Julius and the rest of our

party long ago.

But the thought that we're carrying the fate of humanity on our shoulders makes me feel like I'm going to cave under the pressure…

We step into the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Immediately, several giant spider monsters called greater taratects stand in our way.

I would barely be able to beat a single one by myself, and there are so many of them…

Resisting the urge to turn around and leave, I force myself to stay put.

"Please, climb aboard."

"On these things?"

Wrath nods.

It certainly would take a long time to traverse the Great Elroe Labyrinth on foot, but still…

Using powerful monsters like greater taratects as taxis seems a little excessive.

"The journey might be difficult for some of our elderly companions otherwise."

Wrath glances at the pontiff.

As a noncombatant, his stats are low.

And given his age, it would be hard on him to walk through the labyrinth for so long.

"I guess we'll take you up on that, then."

Taking the initiative, I hop aboard one of the greater taratects.

…It's actually a surprisingly comfy ride.

The eight legs give a certain sense of stability.

This should be a lot easier on the pontiff, too.

Ms. Oka is next to climb onto a greater taratect.

She's got guts, that one.

I don't see any hint of the fear of creepy-crawly creatures like spiders that more delicate ladies might possess.

Even Shun and Balto look a little dismayed, making her bravery even more impressive.

Still, I can't blame them for being nervous. It's probably the intimidating power of these monsters that has them on edge, not just their creepy appearance.

Even I have to fight to keep my knees from knocking.

I'm just putting on a brave front so that I don't look cowardly in front of Shun, who's like a little brother to me.

Honestly, why do I have to go through this…?

Shouldn't the real Güliedistodiez handle this sort of thing himself?

But I've got to suck it up and carry on, or his determination will be for nothing.

I wouldn't stand a chance in that fight, anyway.

Better to be daring and keep moving forward.

If I die, then so be it.

…I feel like I'm being more desperate than daring, but let's not examine that too closely.

"Just get on. Don't worry. If they wanted to kill us, we'd be long dead already. The fact that we're alive means they're not trying to kill us, at least not yet."

"That really doesn't make me feel any better…"

Smiling stiffly, Shun cautiously climbs aboard the greater taratect.

Sue steps forward to get on the same greater taratect as Shun, only for Katia to grab her by the scruff of the neck and force her to get on a different one.

Sparks crackle between the pair.

Please save that sort of thing for after this emergency is over…

Eventually, everyone makes it onto their own greater taratect, and we begin moving.

The greater taratects sprint through the Great Elroe Labyrinth at an incredible speed that must come with being a highly evolved monster.

But what's even more alarming is Wrath, who's leading the way.

He's running on his own two feet, not riding a greater taratect.

He matches their speed, sometimes even slowing his pace.

Which means that if he ran at his full speed, he would outmatch even the greater taratects.

If he got serious, Wrath could probably kill everyone here entirely on his own.

It's not like we didn't know that going in, though. There's no point worrying about it now.

Why are there so many frozen spots around, though?

Since when was the Great Elroe Labyrinth an ice cavern?

I mean, it must be the result of a battle or something. But doesn't that mean two combatants capable of changing their

surroundings like this were going at it in here?

…Our odds of survival are looking worse by the damn second.

It's bad for the heart to feel like you might be struck dead at any moment.

And if I'm feeling like this, how is everyone else managing?

I glance around at the others riding the greater taratects, and… yeah, sure enough, they don't look so hot.

"'scuse me, Mister Wrath. Could we take a little break at some point?"

"Hmm?"

Wrath turns around, slowing his speed to run alongside my greater taratect.

"Look at everyone's faces. See how pale they are? I think it's more of an emotional strain than a physical one, but if we don't take a break, somebody might faint."

"…Good point. All right, there's a slightly more open area not far from here. We'll stop there for a break."

"Thanks."

Before long, we reach the area in question and take a break, although I'm still not sure if everyone will be able to recover.

"Shun, are you all right?"

"Yes…well, no, not really. I'm sorry. I guess there's no point in being stubborn about it. Honestly, I'm having a hard time."

Shun takes a seat on the ground, still looking pale.

The others all look just as bad.

If anything, Shun's complexion is on the better side.

The pontiff and Mr. Balto have gone past pale to the point of completely ashen.

Being surrounded by monsters that could easily kill you takes a serious emotional toll.

I'm sure the intimidation of the greater taratects is even harder on people like the pontiff and Mr. Balto, who have little battle experience.

If anyone looks relatively all right, it's Ms. Oka and Elder Ronandt.

I walk up to the former and address her.

"You're handling this well, all things considered. You've got real grit."

"…No, I wouldn't say that. If anything, I feel as if my emotions have come all the way around to the point of numbness."

“Numbness?”

“Yes.”

Ms. Oka hangs her head.

“I took my students into custody, thinking that it was best for them. But it backfired completely. What was the point of everything I’ve done, then? It was all for nothing. After I realized that, I couldn’t bring myself to do anything anymore. But when I saw you and Ms. Anna fighting against that horde of monsters, my body just moved on its own. It’s not that I’ve recovered, not really. Even now, I can’t bear to think about anything too deeply. It’s more like I’m letting my body move on instinct while my head is still fuzzy.”

“I see…”

Clearly, I misread the situation.

Ms. Oka might be in a more difficult emotional state than any of us.

I have a rough understanding of Ms. Oka’s experiences and the details of her unique skill.

But allow me to say this much.

“Ms. Oka, you did nothing wrong.”

“Please don’t try to cheer me up…”

“I’m not. This is just my honest opinion.”

Interrupting her objections, I press forward.

“Listen. Your actions were not pointless, far from it. Everything we do results in change. Just by taking action, you have already altered the outcome. If you hadn’t done anything, things might have been far worse. So how can you say it was for nothing? Even now, most of the reincarnations are still alive. I wouldn’t call that ‘nothing’ at all.”

“…Do you really think so?”

“I do. Besides, I happen to think that there’s no point in beating yourself up over the past. Ms. Oka, are the students you wanted to save really the kind of people who would be happy to see you suffering like that?”

“Well…no, of course not…”

“Then it’s time to stop brooding and start looking ahead. The only ‘pointless’ action is continuing to cause yourself harm.”

“…You’re right. I’ll do my best.”

Though I’m afraid it came out as a lecture, I know that Ms. Oka was an adult in her past life, even if she looks like a child now. I’m sure she understood what I was trying to say.

Whether she can truly recover from this point forward is up to her.

For now, at least, Ms. Oka should be fine.

She seems relatively calm, for better or worse.

Since she's already hit rock bottom, she can't sink any lower, even if she isn't bouncing back up yet, either.

That's not exactly the ideal emotional state, but in an emergency like this it might be for the best.

There's no way of knowing which actions will lead to the best results.

I can't judge whether what Ms. Oka did was good or bad, either.

But even if I could, it wouldn't help to hear it from someone else.

She has to find a way to sort through her feelings and accept it on her own.

Fortunately, the reincarnations I saw in the spaceship seemed to think favorably of Ms. Oka.

They didn't look like they were uncertain; if anything, they seemed to feel guilty.

I'm sure they'll be able to make amends as long as nothing goes terribly wrong.

That's just one more reason we have to prevent humanity from being exterminated, in order to make that brighter future a reality.

With renewed determination, I leave Ms. Oka's side to speak to Elder Ronandt.

"Humph. You're not here to give me an old-mannish speech, too, I hope? I won't hear it from a whippersnapper like you."

"Ha-ha. I do have the memories of someone who's lived far longer than you, you know."

This person continues to view me as Hyrince, it seems.

A part of me is pleased, while another part is less than thrilled that he's still treating me like a child.

"Memories? Pah! That doesn't mean you experienced it yourself, though, eh? Memories that you can't put to good use are just a waste of space."

"I suppose you have me there."

It's hard to argue with that logic.

After all, when Elder Ronandt was attempting to craft a rune to teleport to D's location and asked if I had any useful information

from Güliedistodiez's memories, I could give him no answer.

I do not carry the entirety of his vast memories, you see.

That would exceed the human brain's storage capacity.

It is more that I remember certain important moments and details.

There are many holes, to the point where I sometimes have few memories of use when it would matter most.

"So, do you think you would be able to create the teleportation conjuring on your own?"

"…Not likely. At this stage, I believe the teleportation itself would work well enough, though there's no telling where it would send me. Even if I did manage to make my way to D's location, I've no guarantee it would be in one piece. I might come out on the other side as a lump of flesh, or some such nonsense."

"Yes, probably best to avoid that."

"I know, eh? That's the best I can do on my own, though it pains me to admit it."

While he looks genuinely frustrated, I think that's still very impressive.

It is a difficult thing to use a skill in more powerful ways than its settings specify.

The system is not designed for that to be possible.

But a few rare geniuses like Elder Ronandt have found a way.

They don't call him humanity's strongest mage for nothing.

Most likely, Elder Ronandt really will succeed in teleporting to D's location if he has the support of the system core.

I have full faith in him.

There's probably no need for me to worry about Ronandt.

Next, I approach the two people who look queasiest of all.

"Are you all right?"

Slumped on the floor, the pontiff and Mr. Balto raise their heads weakly.

"It would be difficult to describe my current state as 'all right' per se, and yet I must not complain in a situation such as this. I shall see this through to the end even if I must crawl to get there."

"I feel the same way. I must speak with the Demon Lord, if not the so-called evil god D as well. I cannot allow myself to collapse before that happens."

Despite their deathly pale faces, both the pontiff and Mr. Balto have a sharp glint of determination in their eyes.

I suppose they'll be fine after all, then.

Hopefully, this break will help prevent them from pushing past their limits and passing out.

They should last a little longer, at least.

Still, it's strange to look at them together like this.

One is the Word of God pontiff, representing humanity.

The other is Mr. Balto, representing demonkind.

Under normal circumstances, the two would never meet.

But now, they are working together toward a common goal.

It would have been unthinkable not long ago.

"It is rather strange to be sitting side by side with you, I must remark."

Evidently, the pontiff noticed the same thing.

"Indeed. If we had more time, I would rather like to sit down and talk with you a while."

"Perhaps we ought to do just that, if we both make it through this battle safe and sound."

The pontiff and Balto smile at each other.

Safe and sound, eh?

Knowing the pontiff's personality…no, I should leave it at that.

I can't be sure of anything just yet.

Now, as for the others…

Shun is surrounded by a swarm of girls.

Katia, Sue, Yuri, and Fei.

…I should kick that kid's ass.

Better to just leave them be at this point.

You're on your own, pal!

Which only leaves one more person…

Prince Hugo, who's leaning against the wall with his arms folded.

He hasn't spoken a single word since this group came together.

In fact, from what I can tell, he's been like that for a long time now.

He almost seems more like a statue than a living person.

Honestly, I don't really want to get near him.

I don't know Prince Hugo very well, anyway.

The first time we met face-to-face was during the battle at the elf village, and we haven't had a single proper conversation since then.

I don't know how to approach someone who I've mostly only

heard about secondhand.

"Hey, kid."

So I decide to go the safest route and greet him casually.

At that, Prince Hugo gives me a glance, then drops his gaze back down as if he's already lost interest.

He doesn't even say a word.

Oof, he's really going to ignore me like that?

I've had people ignore me out of envy before, but his attitude is as if he sincerely has no interest in me whatsoever.

The person who ignored me out of envy still paid attention to what I was doing, at least.

Prince Hugo doesn't seem to care what I do.

Maybe he doesn't care about anything at all, not even himself.

Like he really doesn't think of himself as a living person.

"You're too young to be acting like such a recluse, you know that?"

I can't resist saying it, even if it feels nosy.

Though I expected he might ignore me again, Prince Hugo turns his gaze back toward me.

"How long I've lived has got nothing to do with it."

"Oh really? But doesn't it seem like a waste to be so pessimistic from a young age when you still have your whole life ahead of you?"

Prince Hugo snorts at that.

"Let me ask you something, then. Has the ebony god found happiness in that long life of his?"

"Well…"

Damn, I wasn't expecting this kid to ask such a tough question.

"…I kinda feel for the ebony god, myself. Yeah, I know our circumstances are nothing alike. But I think we both know how it feels to have already passed the happiest part of your life, and there's not a damn thing you can do to get it back."

…I suppose he might have a point there.

Güliedistodiez's happiest times were probably the daily life he led before the goddess Sariel was trapped within the system.

The days when he would frequently visit the orphanage Lady Sariel created, and the kids would all come to greet him, including the now Demon Lord Ariel.

Those irreplaceable moments are Güliedistodiez's happiest memories.

But they can never come back again.

Even if the world does find peace, I doubt he will ever be as happy as he was in those days.

From what he says, it sounds like Prince Hugo feels the same way.

“Still, that doesn’t mean you should just give up on trying to be happy, does it?”

“I don’t care. I can’t be bothered to even make that much effort.”

It doesn’t sound like anything I say is going to get through to him.

Though he doesn’t seem to be doing this out of pure self-reproach like Ms. Oka, he’s clearly closed off his heart completely.

Prince Hugo certainly has done too many terrible things to be forgiven, and it doesn’t seem like he wants anyone to forgive him, either.

But from where I’m standing, Hugo is a victim, too.

An innocent youth in another world was killed because of this world’s problems, and reborn here only to be used to try to solve those same problems.

I’m sure it’s complicated for people like Shun who suffered at Hugo’s hands, but to me it still seems worth sympathizing with him.

When I think about it, most of the reincarnations have had some major influence affect their lives.

The reason they were reincarnated in the first place is primarily because of this world’s troubles, yet even in their new lives, they’ve suffered needlessly just by dint of being reincarnations.

And now, the fate of this world is in their hands.

Another grave sin perpetrated by this world, it would seem.

As a resident of that same world, I have no right to lecture any of them.

“I see. Don’t mind me, then.”

I attempted to lightly dismiss my own words so he wouldn’t overthink them and act out in some strange way.

Urgh. Honestly…

None of this is easy.

We each have our own lives and have walked different paths.

No matter how much has happened and how I might feel about it, worrying about things won’t magically lead to the right answer.

It’s entirely possible to worry about something for a long time

and still come up with the wrong answer, too.

In many cases, there isn't even a right or wrong answer at all.

Something might seem right from one point of view, only to seem wrong from another.

But we cannot simply stop thinking about anything, either.

Although life might be a little easier if we could worry about things a little less.

Really, what a mess…

I'd like to stop thinking about things myself…

"Ready to keep moving?"

But there is no time for that.

At Wrath's prompting, we resume our journey.

I cannot stop thinking, not right now.

For what we carry on our shoulders is the fate of all mankind.

Ronandt

Bouncing along on the backs of greater taratects, we arrive at what's known as the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

I myself have once been to the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth, and that in itself was already a hellscape of dreadful monsters into which no man could ever tread.

The Bottom Stratum must be truly beyond human comprehension.

In other words, we may very well be the first humanoids to ever set foot here.

'Tis a shame we have no time to relish such a remarkable feeling.

"Hey, you made it."

Demon Lord Ariel herself was waiting for us when we arrived.

She sits in a white chair that is probably made out of hardened spider thread.

Behind her stands Sophia and…I believe his name was Merazophis? With demon commanders on either side, she truly cuts the dignified figure of a true Demon Lord.

There are four small spiders at the corners of her chair, and for some reason, one of them is frantically flailing its legs at me specifically.

…What in the world?

Intrigued, I Appraise the spider despite myself.

The result shows that it is a monster called a puppet taratect with the name of Fiel.

…Hrmmm?

Fiel?

FIEL?!

That tiny spider is the little girl who was hanging all over me in

the elf village?!

So this is that girl's true form?!

Hah…now that is a surprise.

"Curious about my kids?"

"Hrm? I suppose you could say that. I'm just surprised to see this little one looking so different from the last time we met."

"Yeah, no kidding. Her favorite outfit got burned up in battle earlier."

Demon Lord Ariel addresses me amiably.

Outfit, eh…would you really call that an outfit?

Well, no matter. Clearly she is still the same on the inside, no matter how she looks.

That much is obvious from the fact that Fiel has now hopped onto my head and is poking and prodding my cheeks.

"Argh! Get off me, missy!"

"Fiel, behave yourself."

Scolded by the Demon Lord, Fiel skitters away.

That rascal! Where is her sense of seriousness in this dire situation?!

Now she's gone and ruined the whole mood!

"Elder Ronandt…"

Young Hyrince is staring at me in exasperation. But that wasn't my fault, I tell you!

"Now then, shall we get started?"

"May I have a moment to speak with you first?"

Demon Lord Ariel attempts to get right down to business, only to be interrupted by the representative of the demons, Mr. Balto.

"Hrm. I've got nothing to say to you, but sure, I guess. Go ahead."

"Thank you."

Mr. Balto bows his head to Demon Lord Ariel. I wonder what he's going to ask her?

I doubt any answer she gives will be what he wants to hear…

"Demon Lord, might I ask what exactly we demons meant to you?"

…Yeah, I figured it'd be something like that.

I fear her response is only going to hurt the lad further.

"What's the point of asking me that? I don't think any good will come of me telling you, y'know?"

"Even so, I want to hear it from you personally."

The Demon Lord shakes her head and sighs.

"Then I'll give it to you straight, okay? I don't have any strong feelings at all about demonkind. That's the honest truth."

In a way, that's harsher than saying that she hated them or some such thing.

Even after using them to her own ends and forcing them to fight a massive war against humanity not long ago, the Demon Lord doesn't care one iota about demonkind.

How must Mr. Balto feel about this?

"I…see."

Balto heaves a deep, long sigh.

"Thank you. It's a bit of a relief to hear you say it out loud."

"Oh? I was expecting you to have a few choice words for me, no?"

Even Ariel seems surprised at how quickly Mr. Balto backed down.

"Of course, I have much more than a few choice words. But that would hardly change your mind about the path you've chosen, would it? Surely you didn't start all of this with such half-hearted conviction that you could be talked out of it. If you were not utterly devoted to your cause, that would be far more disrespectful to my fallen brethren."

"Yeah, of course. I wouldn't turn the whole world against me if I wasn't damn sure about it."

"Then I doubt anything I say would make a difference. Our paths have simply diverged, for better or worse. All that is left for me to do is to devote all of my efforts to demonkind as its representative."

Oh-ho, I see.

He asked her that to clarify things in his own mind, not to try to make the Demon Lord feel guilty.

In that case, Mr. Balto is a remarkable man, worthy of representing demonkind.

"Gotcha… By the way, Balto. I don't have any strong feelings about demonkind, but I do feel grateful to *you* for working so hard for me all those years."

"…I am honored."

Balto smiles back, somehow looking tearful and frustrated all at once.

"All right, then. Let's get this party started for real this time.

The system core is just beyond that door."

Demon Lord Ariel points behind her.

A door looms in the wall.

Beyond it is the system core.

The place where the goddess Sariel is trapped.

"From here on out, if any of you make one wrong move, I'll kill you on the spot."

That statement is no lie, I'm sure.

The piercingly murderous glint in her eyes is proof enough of that.

I hear someone gulp quietly.

"If anyone turns traitor and tries to stop the destruction of the system, I swear I'll make sure all of humanity dies after this, even if the ivory god's side loses. I'm talking utter extinction, not just half."

This, too, is no lie.

She would do it, no doubt about it.

Betrayal comes at a high price.

"I solemnly swear that we will do no such thing."

"Yeah, I sure hope not."

The Demon Lord doesn't seem to trust the pontiff's vow.

She did say in her speech during the world quest sequence that she doesn't expect much out of humanity.

She's never trusted us in the first place.

The only way to prove that we are trustworthy, then, is to make sure we do not betray her.

"Okay, let's get going. Oh, right, before we go…catch."

"Huh? Whoa!"

The Demon Lord tosses something to Schlain the Hero, who manages to catch it.

It's…a sword?

"Oh, isn't this the royal family's sword?"

"What in the…?!"

Hyrince stares at the sword in shock, then at Demon Lord Ariel.

"That's the Sword of the Hero. It's the counterpart to the Sword of the Demon Lord, which only I can use. It's a sword that can only be wielded by the Hero, and can produce a single attack strong enough to kill a god, but only once."

Schlain looks back and forth between the Demon Lord and the sword.

"And also…hey, wake up. I know you're in there, Byaku."

“Leave me alone.”

“Wha…?!”

A voice responds to Demon Lord Ariel’s call.

Then a small white dragon slithers out of the sword in Schlain’s hands.

“Took you long enough, sleepyhead. Let me guess, you’ve been sulking because your favorite hero got killed?”

“Hmph.”

Byaku, who is presumably a light dragon, lets out a huff.

It appears that the Demon Lord hit the nail on the head.

“Well, I don’t really care why you were sleeping. Just protect the current hero there, will ya?”

“As if I need you to tell me that.”

“Whoa?! U-um, hello?”

Byaku twines around Schlain the Hero’s arm.

“That’s Byaku the Light Dragon. He’s an ancient dragon chief who’s been guarding the Sword of the Hero. Better keep him with you just in case.”

“Hmph.”

The light dragon huffs again, while Schlain looks bewildered.

“…Are you sure about this? Putting a powerful weapon in the hands of the enemy?”

“Fine by me. Even with the Sword of the Hero and Byaku both, we could still kill you all easily.”

The Demon Lord responds to Hyrince’s question with unshakable confidence.

As if she could kill us all with one hand tied behind her back.

What a frightening little lady.

“All you guys have to do is not double-cross me. Easy, right?”

That’s rich coming from someone who clearly doesn’t trust us as far as she can throw us.

I certainly have no intention of betraying anyone, though I can’t speak for the others…

It seems prudent to refrain from such foolishness, but I suppose we’ll see what happens, eh?

“Come on, let’s go for real this time.”

Still seated, the Demon Lord gives the signal, and Fiel and the other small spiders lift her chair and carry her forward.

Those must be the four little girls I saw in the elf village.

I’m sure of it, though I only Appraised Fiel.

If so, those tiny creatures are actually legendary-class monsters with stats in the ten thousands.

Carrying a chair would be a simple matter for them.

Still, I have to wonder why Demon Lord Ariel would go out of her way to have the little spiders cart her around like that.

Judging by her complexion, I suspect she is in poor health.

Her overall presence isn't as strong as I expected, either.

It looks to me as if she's in a significantly weakened state.

Not that I'm going to Appraise her to confirm that theory, of course.

The Demon Lord puts her hand on the door.

It lights up and gradually opens.

And beyond the door is…

"O-ooooh…?!"

So this is what it means to be at a loss for words!

The spectacle beyond the door is unlike anything I've ever seen.

The floor, walls, and even the ceiling are covered in magic circles.

They're so incredibly complex and artistically crafted that I cannot begin to read their meaning.

But I can tell at a glance that this is a truly stupendous working!

Incredible! Who knew such things could exist in this world?!

I am reminded yet again that my knowledge is still but a paltry sliver!

Oh dear. Everyone went on ahead while I was standing here awestruck.

I attempt to catch up to them quickly, yet with easy enough steps that I will not give away my flustered state.

One gets better at such maneuvers with age.

Then, when I catch up to where the others have stopped, I am struck breathless yet again.

There is someone in the center of the room.

Her lower body is gone, her upper body suspended in midair as if pinned to an invisible cross.

This must be none other than Goddess Sariel.

The savior of this world.

The pontiff falls to his knees in front of her.

Following suit, the rest of us kneel as well.

Yes, I see now.

Demon Lord Ariel's wrath seems all the more justified upon

witnessing this painful sight…

A few moments pass in that state.

Not one of us says a word.

“Proficiency has reached the required level.”

Only the voice of the goddess Sariel echoes in the room.

“All right. Ronandt, was it? Go ahead and start.”

“Hrm. Very well.”

When the Demon Lord finally breaks the silence, I obey and walk up to the goddess.

“Please pardon me for touching you, O Goddess.”

After asking permission, I place my hands on Goddess Sariel.

Focusing, I close my eyes.

You can do it, self. I know you can.

Just remember how you used the master-familiar connection to teleport to Schlain’s location.

This is no different from that time.

I must simply use the connection to the system to teleport to D’s location.

I will find where the evil god hides.

And I will follow the path to reach her.

I can sense it. Two powerful presences connected to the system.

But one of them is overwhelmingly larger than the other.

It’s so unknowably vast that it fills me with fear.

This must be the evil god’s presence.

The other one is likely the ebony god.

All I must do, then, is use this connection to teleport to the evil god.

I focus all my energy on constructing the spell.

Hrrgh! It’s consuming my MP so fast!

Teleportation always requires a lot of MP, but in this case, my entire stores might not even be enough?!

Nng! But I cannot fail!

I boasted to everyone that they could count on me.

I will succeed no matter what!

Gritting my teeth, I form the teleportation spell.

Stop screaming, brain! Surely humanity’s strongest mage can handle this much!

“I’m going to activate it! Prepare yourselves!”

This teleportation will take us beyond our world.

We must expect the unexpected.

That is why I shouted a warning before activating the spell, though I do not know if it made a difference in the end.

The teleportation spell activates, sure and true.

I did it, even if my MP is empty.

I quickly gulp down an MP recovery potion.

Though it's far from a complete recovery, at least I've gotten a little MP back.

Only after that, and one deep breath, can I finally manage to look at my surroundings.

Everyone who was by my side before the spell went off is standing there safe and sound.

"It appears I succeeded, eh?"

"Yes, very well done."

It's clear at a glance that this is no ordinary place.

In fact, I cannot see anything at all.

There is only darkness as far as the eye can see.

And yet I can see everyone around me clearly, even though there is no light source in sight.

The people are visible, yet our surroundings seem empty.

What a strange sight indeed.

And in the midst of it all sits something stranger still.

A lone young lady, disturbingly beautiful.

I am certain as soon as I lay eyes upon her.

This must be the evil god D.

Fei

Our old world was unbalanced and unfair.

I knew that from early on in my previous life.

There are the haves and the have-nots, and those roles never change.

And even those who have can rarely win against others who have more.

It's incredibly unbalanced and unfair.

And the girl named Hiiro Wakaba seemed to embody that unfairness.

I fell in love in middle school.

The object of my affection was a year ahead of me at the same school.

We met because we were in the same club.

It was my first love.

In retrospect, I think I was so excited about it that I got ahead of myself.

These days, I can't even remember what he looked like, even though I supposedly loved him so much.

At the time I thought I was deeply in love. Now, though, I think I've forgotten his face because my feelings were just that fickle.

Even if I did study for a high school way above my level and manage to get in, just so I could chase after him.

I used to hate school and homework so much that when I finally studied seriously for an entrance exam, my mom actually got worried about me, funnily enough.

Looking back on that now, maybe that's kind of a good memory.

We fought like hell at the time, though.

I mean, she asked me if I was “all right in the head,” you know?

Here I was taking school seriously for once!

Shouldn’t she be happy about that as a parent?!

All that aside, when I finally got into the high school I’d worked so hard and raised my grades for, I was hit with a swift reality check.

The boy I was chasing had started stalking a female student…

It’s fine that he rejected me when I asked him out.

I mean, it’s not *fine*, I was devastated at the time…but now I realize that it was pointless in the first place.

The guy was a total geek, although back then I thought of him as “quiet and mysterious.”

It’s not that he didn’t talk at all, he just wasn’t the assertive type.

I guess he was kinda like Shun in that way.

And in both cases, it turns out that kind of guy gets freaked out when someone acts assertive toward them.

Oh, I was assertive, all right.

I went after him like you wouldn’t believe!

Boundaries? Never heard of them.

I mean, I even followed him all the way to high school.

Talk about over-the-top, right?

Thinking about it now, I can’t blame him for being creeped out when a girl who wasn’t his type kept coming after him like crazy.

It’s easier to be frank about it now that I’ve left him behind me.

Not that I had any choice, since I’m literally in a different world!

But still, like, if someone you liked was stalking someone else, wouldn’t you be mad, too?

It’d be one thing if he was dating another girl, ’cause at least then you could give up properly. A stalker, on the other hand…

What’s worse, she didn’t even give him the time of day.

That girl’s name was Hiiro Wakaba.

Annoyingly enough, she was so gorgeous that I could understand why the boy I liked got obsessed to the point of stalking her.

She was number one by a landslide in the boys’ secret ranking of the hottest girls in school.

I was somewhere in the teens, by the way, which I’m still not sure how to feel about.

On the one hand, that means that out of all the girls in school from first-years to third-years, I was definitely pretty high on the list.

But on the other hand, isn't it kind of a bummer that I didn't quite make it into the top ten?

PS: It was some second-year boys who made that ranking, and the girls in their class are the ones who put it up for all to see.

It even made the rounds to every student in school, complete with photos attached.

And as much as it pains me to admit it, I could totally see why Wakaba was by far the best ranked.

Yes, she had a gorgeous face and figure, obviously.

But beyond all that, there was just something special about her.

Like something supernatural, or maybe paranormal.

She carried herself like she wasn't even human.

That mystical aura of hers is what really grabbed your attention, not just her appearance.

And most people who saw Wakaba could be divided into two camps.

Those who feared her, and those who worshiped her.

Although honestly, I think it was a little bit of both for most people.

Maybe you could call it awe, I guess?

It's just a matter of which of those two reactions was stronger.

For my former crush, it was definitely worship, which is why he wound up stalking her.

…You know, I was too heartbroken to think about this at the time, but why in the world was I so obsessed with the kind of guy who would turn into a stalker?

Then again, considering that I followed him to high school, maybe I was also kinda…

Nope! Not gonna think about that!

All I can say is that I was *seriously* short-sighted at the time, to the point where I blamed my rejection entirely on Wakaba.

Most of it was that I just didn't like the girl who'd stolen my crush's heart, although part of my hatred might have been that I was afraid of her, too.

…Yeah, I admit it. I was scared of Wakaba.

I hated the way she looked at all of us like we were ants beneath her feet.

The way she didn't react to me in the least, no matter how much I bullied or harassed her.

She pissed me off, and scared me senseless.

So after I was reincarnated, when I was stuck inside that egg, all I thought about was Wakaba.

More than my old crush, more than my family, more than anyone, I thought about her.

Maybe that's why, when we met the self-proclaimed Wakaba in this world, I could tell right away that it wasn't really her.

Maybe that's why, when we teleported from the system core or whatever to meet the so-called evil god D, it made perfect sense to me when I saw that it was Wakaba.

"Welcome."

Wakaba spreads her arms in greeting.

This place is strange.

It's pitch-black everywhere you look, except we can all still see one another just fine.

How can it be so dark but so clear at the same time?

In the center of that darkness sits Wakaba.

Several monitors float in the air in front of her seat.

"Ahh, I get it…"

This murmur of comprehension comes from Demon Lord Ariel, not me.

She's sitting in a chair, too.

Hers is white and has a weird texture that somehow reminds me of a spiderweb.

Four small spiders are holding up each of the chair's legs.

"Small" is relative here, since they're still around the size of a tarantula from Earth, if not bigger, but compared to the giant things we rode to get here…well.

Anyway, these small spiders are holding up the Demon Lord's chair and carrying it around.

At first I thought it was mean to make such tiny spiders carry her around, until I noticed that she obviously wasn't doing very well.

For real, she looks like she'd barely even be able to stand

without fainting dead away.

Is she sick or something? Either way, that definitely caught all of us by surprise.

“It’s an honor to meet you. I am Demon Lord Ariel. Please forgive my rudeness for entering your presence in such a disgraceful state.”

“No problem. Also, you don’t really need to introduce yourselves, or be so prim and proper. I know all of you perfectly well, and respect isn’t worth anything unless you really mean it from the heart.”

Is that her way of saying it’s no use trying to put on a polite act?

“Lemme ask you this, then. You’re Wakaba, aren’t you? What’s the deal with that?”

Getting a little annoyed, I go ahead and address her without respect. Hey, she asked for it.

It’s not my problem if a few people, like the pontiff and that demon guy, stare at me with their eyes bugging out of their heads.

“Right, I suppose I should introduce myself first for those who aren’t entirely in the know. I’m D, an evil god. That’s not my real name, of course. And I also spent some time at the same school as you reincarnations. At the time, I went by Hiiro Wakaba. Also not my real name, of course.”

Neither of them is your real name?!

Then can you really call that introducing yourself?

“Uhh…come again? You spent time as a student with the reincarnations?”

Hyrince cautiously ventures a question.

“That’s correct. And that’s when an attack trying to kill an administrator from this world came after me. It was actually intended for the ebony god, until Goddess Sariel redirected it by making me the target instead. As you can see, I’m perfectly unharmed, but all the students who got caught in the blast were killed. I suppose you could say it’s this world’s fault, and mine, that the reincarnations died.”

Hello?! It’s a little late for that big reveal!

Are you kidding me?! Seriously?!

“Excuse me? Are you joking? Can I punch this chick?”

“Fei! Cut it out!”

Shun hurriedly stops me when those words come tumbling out

of my mouth.

Come on, I wasn't really going to punch her, I swear.

But seriously, I spent so long feeling guilty in that egg 'cause I thought I was being punished for bullying Wakaba, only to find out it's her fault we died in the first place!

I want my money back!

Can you blame me for getting the urge to punch her just a little bit?

"I felt bad about it, too, you know. That's why instead of just letting you all die, I collected your souls, gave you skills, and sent you to be reborn in this world with your memories intact."

"What, like that's supposed to make up for it?"

"That was the idea, yes."

"It's not like we asked to be reincarnated, you know."

"Does that mean you would've preferred to just die?"

"I mean…"

Well, no, but still…

Obviously I wouldn't want to just die for no apparent reason and stay dead.

But I can't say for sure if it was better that we got reincarnated.

Especially when we got caught up in all this "end of the world" stuff here.

"Couldn't you have just made it so we didn't die in the first place?"

Natsume speaks up.

That's kinda surprising.

I didn't expect him to take the initiative on anything at this point.

"In theory, that would've been a possibility, yes."

"So why…!"

"Well, I was under no obligation to go *that* far for you. Reviving the dead is a whole lot harder than reincarnation, you know."

Harder? So we got reincarnated just because she was feeling lazy?

"You can't be serious…!"

"If you've got a problem, take it up with the people of that world. It's not like *I* tried to kill you. I felt a bit of guilt and pity for you dying in an accident that wasn't your fault, so I lent you a little hand, that's all."

When she puts it that way, it's hard to argue back.

I know it wasn't really her fault.

And I know we've got her to thank for the fact that we were reborn at all.

But still, still…!

"You're saying this like you did it for our sakes, but that's not actually true, is it? I bet you had your own goals in mind, and us getting reincarnated was just a bonus, right?"

"Right. Why do you ask?"

Wakaba doesn't even try to dodge my question.

I knew it.

She definitely doesn't seem to feel any kind of guilt, pity, or any such noble emotions toward us, that's for sure.

The only feeling I get from her is that old familiar sense that she's looking down on us like ants beneath her feet.

"It wasn't any particularly lofty goal, though. I just figured I might give that world a little boost. Things were getting stagnant there, plus it looked like it was on a one-way path to destruction pretty soon. So I figured if I gave some souls from another world a little bit of power and sent them to reincarnate into this one, it might shake things up a bit."

Wakaba looks at us with the cool expression of someone observing the behavior of lab rats.

Maybe that's all we are to her, and maybe she sees this whole world as an experiment, too.

And if it all went under, she wouldn't think twice about it.

"What were you trying to do in this world, exactly?"

"Nothing much. As I said before, I didn't have any serious goals in mind, you know? Officially, I just lent a little support to help revive the planet on the ebony god's request. Everything else was just a little personal project of mine. The same goes for you reincarnations. I didn't do it out of any ill will, even if I wouldn't quite call it good will, either."

"What 'personal project'?"

"I wanted to turn an entire world into a game. Then I wanted to see if anyone might find a way to become a god in that toxic gamelike environment. That's about it."

Wakaba's calm comment belies the total insanity of the concept and scale.

She really isn't like us at all.

The way she thinks is just too different from that of any normal

human.

It's to the point that just talking to her like this feels so wrong it almost makes me sick.

Even though we're speaking the same language, I don't think we'll ever understand each other.

"I had high hopes for that Potimas Harrifenas, and for you, Demon Lord Ariel. I thought both of you might be able to attain godhood. Turns out I was wrong about that, though. Especially Potimas Harrifenas… Given his obsession with staying alive, I thought he might find a way to surpass the limits of the human vessel to achieve it, but it didn't work out very well for him."

"I shudder to think what would've happened if *he* became a god."

Demon Lord Ariel looks blatantly disgusted.

As far as I can tell, Wakaba didn't care whether someone was good or evil, only if they could become a god or not.

She just wanted someone, anyone, to produce results in her little experiment.

Something like that, anyway.

"Okay, enough about all that. What's up with that weird copy of yours? The so-called ivory god?"

I change the subject before her thoughts on the previous one can drive me totally insane.

I want to know what the deal is with that weird Wakaba look-alike.

That's basically got to be her puppet or something, right?

Seems a little excessive to pit it against the original ebony god if you're trying to give the world a "boost," though.

Not to mention, something feels off about that idea.

Would Wakaba here really get involved with such a proactive pawn?

"Ah, yes, my stand-in. If I was to reincarnate all of the students and one teacher present in that classroom, my seat would be left empty. In order to fill in that gap, I reincarnated the soul of a spider that just happened to be in the classroom at the time. Oh, and instilled it with memories of being Hiiro Wakaba."

"Excuse me?"

That doesn't even make any sense.

Confused, I look around at Shun and the others, not one of whom appears to understand what Wakaba is saying.

“What does that even mean?”

“Exactly what I said. It’s just a spider. So weak that even I thought it was just going to die right away. It only existed to prove that Hiiro Wakaba also got reincarnated. At first, anyway.”

I still don’t get it, or maybe it’s just not possible to understand at all.

That fake Wakaba wasn’t working for this one?

“So she’s not your pawn?”

“Oh no. That thing does whatever it wants. Amusing, isn’t it? The humans I had such high hopes for turned out to be a flop, and the creature I threw in as an expendable substitute is the one that wound up attaining godhood.”

Umm…o-kaaay?

To sum it up, that means the fake Wakaba became a god all on her own, and is fighting the ebony god of her own free will?

“You have my gratitude for sending White to this world, and to me.”

Demon Lord Ariel’s voice is full of warm feelings toward that fake Wakaba.

I can tell from her voice that the Demon Lord trusts the fake Wakaba completely, at the very least.

“The destruction of the system, and the collection of the resulting energy. It’s a method I left as a hidden feature, but given the current state of that world, I would say that it’s the correct choice. While the plan the Word of God pontiff there came up with isn’t bad, either, between the uncertainty and the huge losses involved, there’s a good chance it wouldn’t produce enough energy.”

At Wakaba’s words, everyone turns to look at the pontiff.

Finally, he speaks, as if he can’t handle the pressure of all those stares.

“My plan was to kill all of the gods who exist in this world.”

Huh? I don’t think I get it.

“What do you mean by that?”

Yuri is the one who questions the pontiff. Apparently, she didn’t get it, either.

“A god is a life-form containing an immense amount of energy. And the system has the ability to collect energy from any living thing that dies, even if that living thing is a god. If a god were to die, the system would be able to collect its energy, you see.”

Ahh, that's why you were gonna kill the gods?

Wait a sec. Doesn't that mean…

"So you intended to lay waste to Goddess Sariel, the ivory god, and even your own ally, the ebony god?"

"Just so."

Without another word, Yuri fires attack magic at the pontiff.

Huh? Wha—?!

"Watch out!"

Barely a second before the spell can hit the pontiff, Shun jumps in the way and blocks it.

If he hadn't made it in time, wouldn't that have killed the old pontiff?!

"Yuri! What do you think you're doing?!"

"I could ask you the same question. Get out of the way so I can kill him, Shun."

"What? Are you hearing yourself right now, young lady?"

Ms. Oka seems distressed at Yuri's words.

"But that man needs to die immediately. How dare you speak of the gods that way? Hurry up and die, Pontiff. Die."

Yikes! When did Yuri get so scary?!

"Yuri. I can understand where you're coming from, but please restrain yourself for now. This is no time for us humans to be fighting among ourselves."

"…Oh, all right."

Shun manages to get Yuri to reluctantly back down.

Is it just me, or does it seem like the pontiff is gonna end up dead no matter how things shake out?

It *is* pretty awful that he was gonna kill the ebony god, his own ally.

Even if it's for the greater good, you've gotta draw the line somewhere, y'know?

Nobody likes a backstabber for a leader.

"Well, that's just one more reason that I intended to destroy around half of humanity, to make up for the lack of energy."

"Right! That's what we came to talk to you about!"

We got off topic when we realized the evil god was really Wakaba. I almost forgot that the real reason we're here is to do something about her stupid plan to destroy half of humanity!

"It's as I just said. The ebony god's side's methods wouldn't create enough energy. The only way to complete the revival of this

planet with the system still running would be to sacrifice approximately half of mankind. Which is why I intended to supply the remaining energy in the event of the ebony god's victory. If the ivory god's side wins, half of humanity or so would die anyway. Either way, half of humanity is either going to die or get destroyed. That's just how it is."

What she just said is basically a death sentence for humanity.

The pontiff sinks to his knees.

"But…that means everything I have done…"

"I wouldn't go so far as to call it pointless. You were just too late."

The pontiff hangs his head at Wakaba's harsh words.

"Still, the planet will be saved, and half of humanity will live, when originally the planet would have been destroyed and all of humanity with it. I think that's a solid outcome, don't you?"

Yeah, it does sound like a win when you put it that way. But for those of us who currently live in this world, it's a serious problem.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Shun presses desperately.

"Did you want to do something?"

"Of course it is."

"Well, I *could* do something about it."

"Please!"

"Then what will you offer me in exchange?"

That stops Shun's enthusiasm in its tracks.

"The ebony god offered me that planet. He pleaded that I could do anything I wanted with that world if I would only restore it and save Sariel's life. I accepted the offer, not that a dying planet has any real value, and decided to create the system and control it."

Wakaba's eyes flick toward Shun.

"Half of humanity. What can you pay me in exchange for saving it?"

Shun falls silent under Wakaba's level gaze.

Wakaba was within her rights to make the planet into a game because she received it as fair payment from the ebony god.

Offering her something without any value wasn't sufficient payment.

That's why the system has been wringing energy out of this planet's people all this time.

It's like they're paying off a debt.

We don't have anything of value to offer, either.

If we did make a deal to save half of humanity, how long would it take to pay it off?

Would we be reborn in the same world over and over like this world's residents, forced to pay off the debt ourselves?

Just thinking about it gives me the shivers.

Maybe a part of me still felt like this wasn't my problem because I'm a reincarnation.

Like I wouldn't become a slave to debt the way these people did.

But when I consider the possibility that I might meet the same fate, it scares me. No thanks.

And yet Shun responds without hesitation.

"I would give you anything that I have to offer."

"Even the lives of all of your friends and acquaintances?"

"No. Those aren't mine to give. All I can really offer is myself."

"You want to pay for half of humanity with your life alone? How arrogant. And greedy, too."

Shun has no response to that.

Obviously, no one could argue that Shun by himself has the same value as half of humanity.

Like Wakaba said, if he honestly thought that was an even exchange, then he really would be arrogant.

And at this point, maybe it is greedy in a way, trying to save the world without a single sacrifice.

"Even so, if there's even the slightest possibility, I can't let it go."

"Yamada."

Demon Lord Ariel utters Shun's old name in a dangerous tone.

Negishi and Sasajima, who are also on the ivory god's side, look equally displeased.

From what I've heard, Shun pissed off the Demon Lord during their weird little telepathic meeting, too.

The ivory god's side hasn't forgiven this planet's people for depending on the gods to do everything for them.

So I bet they're mad that Shun is begging a god for help now.

"This world's problems should be solved by its own people. And at this point, a peaceful solution just isn't an option anymore. You do realize that you're just embarrassing yourselves by refusing to accept that and trying to wriggle your way out of it, don't you?"

"…Maybe you're right. But I want to keep trying, even if it is

embarrassing. I guess I'm not gracious enough to accept the idea of making a sacrifice like that."

"It's not making a sacrifice, not really. Someone has already been sacrificed this whole time—Lady Sariel, that is. The people of this world have forgotten that. And now they're freaking out because it might finally be their turn to pay the piper. Do you really not see how stupid that seems from my point of view? Hmmm?"

Demon Lord Ariel is still just sitting in a chair, looking frail.

But somehow, the anger she's giving off is so intense I can barely breathe.

"I told you before, didn't I? If you're going to get involved in this battle, you'd better be seriously prepared. And you told me that you are, because it involves you, too. I'm sure that means you're also prepared for us to take you out if we feel you've crossed the line, right?"

As the Demon Lord speaks, Negishi and Sasajima both reach for their weapons.

I automatically crouch into a fighting stance, but to be honest, I don't think we can win this one.

"Please, wait a minute! I'm not your enemy!"

"Sure seems that way to me."

Uh-oh. It's starting to seem like we're gonna have to throw down.

Just then, someone claps sharply.

"Let's leave it at that for now, shall we? It wouldn't be any fun for me if things end with the human side getting wiped out here."

My relief that Wakaba put a stop to the fighting only lasts a moment.

It "wouldn't be fun…"

Is that seriously the only reason?

"Demon Lord Ariel, your point is perfectly valid. However, you too have turned to reincarnations and the ivory god for help. Surely you can't claim that argument only applies to humans."

"…You're right. I apologize."

Whatever her reasons, at least it seems like Wakaba convinced the Demon Lord and her people to lay down their arms.

"Yamada, the answer to your request is no. There's nothing you can offer that would convince me to save that world peacefully."

"I…I see…"

"However, I will give you a chance."

All of us who were hanging our heads look up at once.

"That world has been much more pleasant since the reincarnations arrived. The ivory god's efforts. The Demon Lord Ariel's decision. The determined struggles of Julius the Hero. The diligent efforts of the Word of God pontiff. The survival strategies for demonkind from the likes of Agner and Balto. And of course, the lives and actions of the reincarnations themselves. They instigated enormous change in a world that had been at a standstill. My little boost was a big success. I really rather enjoyed watching it all unfold."

Wakaba talks about the events of this world like she's reviewing plot points from a movie.

"And what's more, you found the hint I left for you and managed to make it all the way here. Surely that is worthy of a bonus."

In spite of the positive-sounding statement, an ominous mood fills the air.

It's a lazily intimidating atmosphere, if not quite a violent one.

Wakaba stands from her chair.

"So here is your bonus stage. I'd like to see you defeat me. If you emerge triumphant, I will save the world for you. Not to worry —I'll hold back as much as I can, of course. That doesn't mean I'll have mercy, though, you understand?"

For a moment, my legs almost give way.

The aura around Wakaba fills me with raw, instinctive fear.

This is it…!

This…feeling!

It's the same supernatural sense Wakaba gave off in our old lives.

Like you're gazing into an infinite, hellish abyss.

When we first met the fake Wakaba, I was certainly intimidated by her godlike aura.

I guess you could say it was more divine and immense than the sense I got from Wakaba.

But I still felt like the real Wakaba was scarier.

The fake Wakaba's presence didn't feel as darkly unknowable, even if it was strong.

That's why I knew on instinct that something was wrong.

That it wasn't really Wakaba.

And now, the real Wakaba is showing us just a glimpse of her

power.

Is this seriously what it's like when she holds back "as much as she can"?

There's no way we can beat her.

I hear a few whumps and turn to see the pontiff and the demon guy going down.

Looks like they couldn't handle Wakaba's powerful presence.

"Pontiff?! Mr. Balto?!"

Hyrince runs over to the two men and calls out to them, with no response.

They must have passed out completely.

"Dammit! What are we supposed to do?!"

"That's obvious, eh? We shall simply have to fight."

Old man Ronandt sounds resolute.

Fight? Against *that*? Are you for real?

"Yes…you're right. Let's do this, everyone."

Shun draws the Sword of the Hero.

Katia and Sue stand on either side of him, while Yuri and Ms. Oka bring up the rear.

Oh, come on!

They're all raring to go! That means *I* have to do it, too!

I transform from human form to wyrm form.

Fine, let's just get this over with!

Besides, when you think about it, this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to slug Wakaba in the face and get away with it!

At least, I've gotta pump myself up like that or I might pass out, too.

"…When you say you'd 'save the world,' to what extent do you mean exactly?"

Demon Lord Ariel addresses Wakaba calmly.

"Good point. I should make myself perfectly clear. If you can defeat me, I will keep alive all of the people who would otherwise die when the system was destroyed. I'll refrain from wiping out half of humanity, too, of course. I shall also supply the rest of the energy needed to restore the world. Ah, yes, and as for Goddess Sariel's life span…I imagine if she were freed from the system now, she would die immediately. Instead, I will ensure that she stays alive for around the same amount of time as your remaining life span, Demon Lord Ariel."

That sounds like more than anyone could have hoped for.

The Demon Lord's eyes widen in surprise.

"Then I suppose we have no choice but to fight, too."

With that, she rises from her chair.

So she *can* stand…

But it's clear at a glance that she's pushing herself already.

Still, with super-scary allies like Negishi and Sasajima, it's deeply reassuring to have her on our side.

"Let's begin, then, shall we?"

For a moment, I don't understand what's happening.

All I know is that Shun goes from standing in front of me to getting tackled aside, and Hyrince, who tackled him, crashes backward.

"Huh?"

I barely recognize the idiotic-sounding voice as my own.

Looking down at Hyrince, I see him crumpled on the ground with a giant hole in his chest.

Clearly, he must have died instantly.

"I told you, didn't I? I'll hold back, but I won't have mercy."

Wakaba shakes out her right hand, scattering blood everywhere.

It's only then that I finally understand that her right hand must have pierced Hyrince's heart.

"By the way, if you were to convert my current strength into stats, I'd say they're around a hundred and fifty thousand each. See? Very generous of me to hold back so much, isn't it?"

That's easily a hundred times stronger than the average human.

We don't stand a chance in hell.

My heart was already broken before the battle even began.

Shun 3

The evil god D was really Wakaba.

That was a shock, of course.

I think all the other reincarnations must have been just as surprised as I was.

Except for Fei, who somehow accepted it right away.

But after the initial shock, it started to make sense to me as we spoke.

It was as if I finally had an explanation for why something about the ivory god seemed off.

The ivory god definitely looked and seemed like Wakaba, but there was always a strange disconnect that I couldn't quite explain.

Fei must have sensed it even more strongly than I did.

As I thought back to the elf village, I remembered that she was staring intensely at the ivory god the whole time.

She must have been suspicious of her even then.

Still, I don't know what to make of the claim that the ivory god's true identity is a spider.

That must be Wakaba's idea of a joke, I guess.

Then, next thing you know, we wind up having to fight her…

"Mr. Hyrince?!"

Right away, Hyrince jumps out and takes a hit that was aimed at me.

By the time he hits the ground, there's a huge hole in his chest, gushing an endless stream of blood.

It's a fatal wound—no, he must be dead already.

"You should really pay better attention."

A voice next to my ear sends a shiver down my spine.

Ah, I'm dead.

That's my first and only thought.

But I didn't die.

"Quit spacing out, will you?!"

Something sends me spinning away through the air.

For a moment, I don't know what happened, until I catch sight of Wakaba and Sophia clashing in my whirling vision.

The shock waves of their impact with each other must have sent me flying.

Is this fight really so intense that just being near it could knock you out?

"Urgh…!"

I manage to right myself before I hit the ground, landing on my feet.

But that's the most I can do. It doesn't seem like I could set foot anywhere near that fight.

Sophia attacks with her giant broadsword, while Wakaba deflects it with twin blades that I didn't see her holding before.

As the broadsword swings down, her attack also freezes their surroundings—except for Wakaba herself, who stays unaffected with a cool expression.

Then a barrage of swords rains down on Wakaba.

Just as Sophia jumps away, the swords hit their target and explode.

I can feel the blast of heat on my face.

It's like a volley of missiles.

That was an attack from Kyouya's exploding magic swords.

Each of them packs unbelievable explosive power, and he's raining them down on Wakaba without holding anything back.

Even from this far away, it feels like the fiery heat might burn my skin.

I'm sure even Wakaba won't be able to stand up to such a strong attack.

…But a moment later, Wakaba calmly strolls out from the heart of the blaze.

"Monster…"

Fei stares at Wakaba, looking shaken.

How can she seriously say that this is her holding back as much as she can?

I don't see how we can possibly beat her.

At the very least, I doubt any of my attacks would lay a scratch on her.

In fact, I can't keep up with her movements at all.

I probably wouldn't even be able to hit her with an attack, never mind dodge any of hers.

If I tried to jump in, I'd only get in Kyouya's and Sophia's way.

It's no use. Clearly, I'm not fit to be an attacker in this fight.

So instead…!

I race over to where Hyrince is lying on the ground.

His eyes are unseeing, and his chest has already stopped moving.

He's dead.

But I have a skill that can change that!

My Mercy skill, which allows me to bring the dead back to life!

I activate the skill and begin reviving Hyrince.

Little by little, the hole in his chest begins to close.

But it's happening too slowly.

While the Mercy skill can bring the dead back to life, such an extraordinary power comes with plenty of restrictions.

It won't work on a body that's too damaged, and there's a time limit, too.

You can only revive someone right after they've been killed.

Please! Let this work!

As time creeps by slowly, the hole finally closes up completely, and Hyrince's body convulses at once.

"Nng? Huh? Am I…?"

"Mr. Hyrince! Are you all right?!"

"Shun? What happened? Ah, that's right! Something pierced my chest?!"

Hyrince quickly sits up and puts a hand to his chest.

"There's no wound? Was I dreaming or something?"

"No, I used my Mercy skill to bring you back."

Mr. Hyrince gives me a look of surprise.

"Really? Then you saved my life. Thank you."

"Not at all. I don't think there's anything else I can do in this fight."

I glance toward the battle unfolding a short distance away.

Sophia and Kyouya are working together to attack Wakaba.

Sophia's broadsword, red liquid, and ice bear down on Wakaba mercilessly, along with Kyouya's magic swords, fire, and lightning.

Yet Wakaba still appears to be fending them off unharmed.

Even though all those attacks look strong enough to obliterate

me without a trace…

"…I don't think I can jump into that fray, either."

"Yeah…"

Mr. Hyrince and I nod at each other.

"So I'm going to try to support them as a combat medic. You know, with my Mercy skill."

"No, wait! You can't do that!"

For some reason, Hyrince forcefully objects.

But using the Mercy skill is the best I can do right now…

"The Mercy skill comes at an enormous cost."

"Yes, I know. It raises your Taboo skill level, right? But mine is already maxed out, so it doesn't matter anymore."

"No! There's another, much bigger price!"

So there's an additional cost I don't know about besides the no-longer-relevant Taboo skill?

Judging by Hyrince's intense expression, it must be something fairly serious.

But I haven't felt any symptoms yet…

"Listen carefully, you hear me? Every time the Mercy skill is used, it erodes the user's soul. That's how difficult it is to revive the dead. In other words, the more you use it, the more your soul is worn away. If you reach your limit, your soul could be destroyed forever."

"What? You're kidding, right?"

"It's true."

The cost is so severe that I blurt out a doubtful question in a near-hysterical voice, only for Hyrince to respond with a dead serious look in his eyes.

He's clearly not joking about this.

So that means every time I use my Mercy skill, my soul gets closer to destruction?

"I don't know how much of your soul has been eroded now. But if you use it too much, it'll definitely have a negative affect on your next life. Hell, it could even affect your current one."

The blood drains from my face.

So all this time, whenever I've used this Mercy skill to save other people's lives, I've been shortening my own?

…Isn't that a small price to pay, then?

"Mr. Hyrince, even so, I'll keep using the Mercy skill."

"Shun?!"

“My life isn’t nearly enough to save half of humanity.”

It’s just like Wakaba said earlier.

My life alone wouldn’t be a fair trade for the lives of half of humanity.

“But if it can save the lives of several others, that’s a great deal, don’t you think?”

I’m scared of my soul getting worn away, of course.

But I can’t let that stop me from using the Mercy skill now.

I came here prepared to face the consequences, just like I told the Demon Lord.

“Now that is admirable indeed.”

Just then, the light dragon Byaku unwinds himself from my arm.

Then he wraps around the arm of Sue, who I didn’t realize was standing nearby.

“I shall lend you my strength, girlchild. If you care for this boy, fight for all you are worth.”

“Byaku?!”

“Envoy of my lord, do you not think this a fitting battle to bet one’s life upon? Indeed, if not now, then when am I to ever venture that risk?”

“But still…”

“Girlchild, thou shalt lessen the number of lives lost in this battle, that we might reduce the burden on this boy.”

“…All right. For my dear brother.”

“Wait a minute! Sue?!”

“I will lay my life on the line just as you have, Brother.”

With that, Sue runs away.

And with such speed, too?!

That’s definitely faster than she was ever able to move before.

Is this the “strength” Byaku said he was going to lend her?

“What kind of dragon is Mr. Byaku, exactly?”

“He specializes in support. He can enhance someone else’s stats, as you see now, and can also use Healing Magic. Little Miss Sue’s stats are probably somewhere in the tens of thousands now.”

Say what?!

“What’s truly terrifying is how easily Sue is handling that massive boost in her stats. Most people would fall all over themselves if they tried to wield power that was given to them so suddenly, and here she is controlling it with ease. I guess she really is a prodigy.”

Just as Hyrince says, Sue is already attacking Wakaba without the slightest hint of awkwardness in her movements.

She's always been a true prodigy, able to keep up with me all along, even though I had the huge head start of being a reincarnation from birth.

Her instincts are a whole lot better than mine.

It gives me hope that she might even be able to handle a fight against Wakaba.

"If you and Sue are so determined to fight, I suppose I'd better follow your lead, too."

"Katia?"

"Come on, work!"

Katia mutters something to herself.

Has she decided to do something in this battle, too?

"There it goes!"

Her face lights up with satisfaction.

"There what goes?"

"Appraise me and see for yourself."

Blinking in confusion, I follow her instruction and do so.

And then…

"Wait, wha—?!"

There's something strange about the information that pops up before my eyes.

Her skill list is far shorter than it should be.

"Huh?!"

I let out another exclamation of surprise when I see one of those few skills.

[Chastity].

It's one of the Seven Heavenly Virtue skills, a ruler skill.

"You're aware of my unique skill, are you not?"

At that, it all finally comes together.

Katia's unique skill is called Conversion.

It's a weird skill, one she always complained was basically useless.

The effect: It can turn a skill back into skill points.

In short, it lets you reallocate your skill points.

But the exchange rate isn't 100 percent. The more you use it, the less beneficial it becomes.

So Katia decided to keep this skill locked away, and never used it once.

But now, looking at her current state, it's clear what she decided to do.

"You finally used Conversion?"

"Precisely. Though I lost most of my skills in the process."

Most of Katia's skills are gone.

All that's really left is Chastity and the handful of skills gained from the Ruler of Chasity title she acquired as a result.

Since her stat-improving skills are all gone, too, her stats have even gone down a little.

They're still easily over a thousand, on average, making her stronger than most ordinary soldiers.

But in this particular battle, stats like that are practically worthless.

Even my usually impressive stats and skills would only slow our side down, after all.

That must be why Katia decided to convert all her skills back into points and bet everything on the Chastity skill, which might just come in handy.

"Mr. Hyrince, are you familiar with the Chastity skill, by chance?"

"Chastity is a barrier-based ability. Its defense is even higher than a Divine Dragon Barrier."

"Why, that's exactly right! So without further ado, I'll serve as our tank. I shan't let you get so much as a single scratch, Shun!"

Now this is promising.

I'll be the healer, and Katia will be the tank.

This way, maybe we can at least be helpful as support, even if we can't do anything as attackers?

"Well, that's just great. Now I've lost my role as the tank."

Mr. Hyrince's giant shield was obliterated by that first attack.

I guess it was as good as a piece of paper on this kind of battlefield, anyway.

It didn't stop Hyrince from being killed by that strike to the chest.

"But I guess it's a good thing I came with a little insurance."

A sly grin spreads across Hyrince's face.

Then, three magic circles appear around him.

Is he…summoning something?

Sure enough, three summons appear: Wind Dragon Hyuvan, Ice Dragon Nia, and Dark Dragon Reise.

“Huh? But how?”

“I made a familiar contract with each of them before we came here. So that I could summon them in case anything happened.”

“You got it, boss man!”

“Oh dear. I was rather hoping I wouldn’t have to do anything…”

“Well? I assume you wouldn’t have summoned us unless something rather serious was afoot, hmm?”

Hyuvan looks amped up, Nia heaves a lazy sigh, and Reise peers at where the others are fighting Wakaba with great interest.

“Some crazy stuff went down, and now we’re fighting the evil god D. If we beat her, we get a happy ending.”

“Thanks for the short and simple explanation.”

“So we just gotta jump into that there shootout and lay the beatdown on the stranger, yeah?! Wait, why’s that one look like a funky copy of the white spider dame?!”

“That’s the evil god D! Go defeat her!”

“I suppose that is easy to follow, but wasn’t there any more eloquent way to put it?”

“There’s no time for a more detailed explanation. I’m counting on you three!”

“Gotcha! Let’s do this!”

Hyuvan takes his dragon form and goes charging into the fray.

Nia transforms as well, slinking over reluctantly.

“Heh. A happy ending, eh? HOW THRILLING.”

Reise’s tone changes partway through the statement.

Looking over, I see something like a half-human, half-dragon.

Is that their dragon form?

We watch as Reise leaps after the others.

“Well, that summoning used up all my MP. There’s nothing else I can do now. Pretty useless, huh?”

Despite his self-abasing words, Mr. Hyrince looks satisfied.

“I was able to summon those three, thanks to you reviving me, Shun. But I’m of no further use now. So if I die again from here on out, you don’t need to revive me. I wouldn’t be any use to you anyway.”

Hyrince’s broad smile is at odds with his absurd request.

“…I can’t do that. I decided to win this fight without losing anyone, remember? So I won’t let anyone die. If you do, I’ll bring you back.”

Saying it aloud reminds me of what I have to do.

"So please do your best not to die, all right?"

"Honestly…my adoptive little brother has turned out to be awfully greedy. And unreasonably demanding, to boot."

Hyrince chuckles and shakes his head.

But then his expression turns serious, and he starts issuing orders.

"Shun, you'll use your Mercy skill to bring back anyone who dies. Miss Yuri and Ms. Oka will be in charge of healing otherwise. Ms. Oka, you have the Charity skill, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

Ms. Oka nods at Hyrince's question.

"That means you can use Miracle Magic, yes? So you should handle the seriously wounded, while Miss Yuri can deal with lighter wounds. But your roles should be flexible, depending on the situation, of course."

Miracle Magic is the advanced version of Healing Magic, able to heal wounds that the unevolved version can't handle.

This magic comes with acquiring the Ruler of Charity skill.

"Ms. Oka's Charity skill has the effect of improving the regenerative abilities of anyone it deems to be her allies. Wounds that aren't instantly fatal should be fairly manageable. If someone does get instantly killed, that's where you come in, Shun."

Charity is one of the Seven Heavenly Virtue skills, which apparently gives any of the user's allies the equivalent of HP Ultra-Fast Recovery LV 1.

As long as they don't die, they should recover from wounds at a remarkable rate.

I've never experienced the effects for myself before, probably because I didn't usually get wounded when we were working alongside Ms. Oka.

…At least, I hope it wasn't because she didn't consider us allies at the time.

"Ms. Oka, please think of everyone here as allies except for D, as strongly as you can. If you aren't confident enough, the skill might not register them as allies."

"Understood!"

Wait…does that mean maybe we really weren't registered as allies before?

N-no, I'm sure it's just that I never got injured in front of her.

That's got to be it.

"Miss Katia, you protect the rest of us with your barrier. Miss Fei, you'll be our transport."

"But of course!"

"Right. Not like there's much else I can do anyway."

Katia responds with enthusiasm, while Fei sounds a little relieved.

I don't know how powerful Katia's barrier is exactly, but with our stats, a single hit from Wakaba would be enough to kill any of us.

Katia's barrier has to be able to ward off Wakaba's attacks or it'll all be over.

And Fei will use her size and speed to bring us to the dead or wounded.

It's a role only she can manage.

"…So there's nothin' for me to do, huh?"

As we all figure out our roles, Natsume is just standing there.

With his abilities…honestly, I'm not sure there's much he can contribute.

Natsume's brainwashing with his Lust skill, while powerful, is more useful for long-term strategies than head-on battles like this one.

It was the same way when I fought him.

He needs to use it on someone repeatedly over a long period of time to successfully brainwash them.

And his other ruler skill, Greed, has the incredible effect of absorbing the abilities of any enemies he defeats…which still hasn't been enough to make him stronger than I am.

And if I'm not any use on this battlefield, Natsume must be even less so…

"Guess you and me will be a burden together, brother."

Hyrince slings an arm around Natsume's shoulder.

"Don't ever call me that again."

Natsume cringes away from Hyrince, scowling.

"Well, let's just try and do whatever we can, anyway."

Undeterred, Hyrince claps Natsume on the back reassuringly.

Just then, two giant creatures appear.

"No way!"

Queen taratects.

Two imposing legendary-class monsters tower over us.

Demon Lord Ariel must have summoned them!

On top of that, more summoning circles appear all around the queen taratects.

Soon, an entire swarm of spider monsters is being summoned.

“Wow. They’re terrifying as an enemy, but it sure is reassuring to see them on our side.”

Hyrince whistles as he watches the spiders continue to multiply.

“Looks like they’re going all-out, too.”

“Agreed.”

The Demon Lord must be just as determined as we are to beat Wakaba.

Then we’d better make sure we give it our all, too.

So we can win it all and finally give this world a happy ending.

But despite my hopes, even as Sophia, Kyouya, Sue, and the ancient dragon chiefs all attack fiercely, Wakaba still stands there unharmed.

Dark Dragon Reise

I've been waiting oh so long for the chance to put my power to good use.

And for a place to die after finally fighting to my fullest.

We creatures called the ancient dragon chiefs are still only a pathetic imitation of true dragons.

In truth, we are chimeras born of Potimas's experiments.

Unlike Ariel and the other humanoid chimeras who were in the custody of Goddess Sariel's orphanage, we ancient dragon chiefs bore appearances close to those of the real dragons.

As such, we were treated not as children to be protected, but as beasts.

Perhaps we had other brethren who were experimented upon and died without my knowledge.

In fact, I do not doubt it is so.

It was Lord Güliedistodiez who protected us all the same.

That is why we feel such respect for our lord.

No doubt Ariel feels similarly toward Goddess Sariel.

Unlike her, however, we were designated as monsters by the system.

Yes, even the gods saw us as beasts.

So we chose to pursue the path of being our lord's kin and underlings.

We gave up on blending in with humans, yet refused to be reduced to mere monsters, and obtained the position of an administrator's loyal retainers.

Along the way, we carried out various roles, increased the number of our kin, and built a foundation on which we could live in this world.

Hyuvan set to the task of purifying the polluted wasteland.

Iena took charge of the seas to prevent people from roaming into the open ocean.

Nia, Nguyen, and Gohka each had their own territories to control, too.

And I was in charge of sealing away the Sword of the Demon Lord.

The main reason for this is that I was a leftover, with no territory of my own.

There was another reason, too: My power was special compared to the powers of the others.

If the time ever came that the Sword of the Demon Lord was needed, my power might be needed as well.

So I was sealed away along with the sword.

You see, I deliberately built up my abilities for a particular purpose.

Namely, to do battle against gods.

The only kind of power that works against gods is the sort of ability that attacks the soul.

Heresy Attacks, which directly assault the soul.

The Rot attribute, which deals in death.

Abyss Magic, which extinguishes the soul.

I put the majority of my skill points toward these specialties and prioritized their growth.

All in case an outside god ever attempted to invade this world.

But of course, such a situation is highly unlikely.

According to my lord, Administrator D is not only far stronger than he is, but feared even among the other powerful gods of the universe.

No god would ever attempt to invade a world under Administrator D's control.

If they did, it would only be out of incredible ignorance.

So my existence was nothing more than an emergency measure —for the unthinkable event of a god's invasion, though it would be quite a serious matter if it did come to pass.

But even as an emergency measure, I would be of precious little use.

If a god did invade our world, it is our lord who would be the first to face them down.

My power would only be necessary if our lord were to lose.

And if our lord could not defeat the invader, then surely I

wouldn't stand a chance.

I was much too weak to serve as a proper emergency measure.

A deeply limited solution, though still better than no solution at all: That is the sum of my existence, my purpose.

My moment would only come in the unlikely event that my lord were to be defeated, and even if that moment did come, I would be more than likely to lose as well. In the grand scheme of things, it made no difference whether I existed or not at all.

One cannot help but laugh.

In the million-to-one chance that my lord lost a battle, I was the insurance with a billion-to-one chance of succeeding in his stead.

None would ever carry more than the faintest hope that I might prove useful.

Thus, I had no real sense of purpose.

I longed for a moment where I could shine.

Where I could put my power to use.

A place where I could finally demonstrate the meaning of my existence.

And if such a place and time exists, surely it must be here and now!

"Hiyah!"

I unleash a Heresy Attack with the heel of my palm.

Unlike the other ancient dragon chiefs, my body's structure is still fairly humanoid even in dragon form.

Thus, I am the only chief who uses human martial arts.

And it just so happens that martial arts combine very well with skills that add an attribute to strikes, like Heresy Attack and Rot Attack.

Administrator D blocks my palm strike with her sword.

The blade digs deep into my skin, and I pull back my hand.

But it's only a matter of seconds before the deep slice in my palm seals itself.

The elf known as Missoka has used her Charity skill to enhance all of our regenerative abilities.

Thanks to her, I can fight without worrying about such wounds as these.

Still, I mustn't let my guard down for even a moment.

D's sword speeds toward me.

My stats average around eleven thousand each.

Even then, her movements are still faster than my eyes can

follow.

There's no time to dodge, either.

Just as the blade is about to slice off the top of my head, another figure intercepts it.

It's Sophia, using her broadsword as a shield against D's attack.

On top of that, she's trapped D's leg with red ice.

I take that opening to spring out in front of Sophia with a flying kick.

But D manages to break the ice and dodges away.

"Too bad. We almost had her."

"INDEED."

Though she dodged our onslaught, it still had an effect.

Administrator D is deliberately avoiding my attacks.

Against me alone, she always dodges or guards with her sword, even though she seems to take no damage from the others' attacks regardless of whether they hit her directly.

This in spite of the fact that attacks far stronger than mine in terms of stats and raw destructive power have been raining down on her nonstop.

This proves that my attacks will work on Administrator D.

And everyone here knows it.

Of course, that means I've become the main offensive force.

Everyone else is backing me up to help ensure that my attacks might hit their target.

Truly, it's quite a thrill.

Here I am in the leading role on such an important stage.

It is the first time I have ever felt so keenly that my existence has a purpose.

I am satisfied.

All that remains is to put everything I have into this role, until the curtain closes on my life at last!

Soon enough, we find ourselves in something of a stalemate.

Everyone on our side is striving to land my attacks.

Administrator D does everything in her power to prevent it.

We keep piling on attacks and defenses by any means necessary.

Everyone here ranks among the most powerful fighters from our world.

As such, they all have command of many different techniques,

enabling us to attack from any and all angles.

Yet D only uses her twin blades, perhaps because she is holding back her power.

She cannot hurt us unless we get close, but due to her unbelievable speed, it is difficult to prevent her from closing the distance in an instant.

What's more, a good offense is indeed the best defense: Since our side does not let up on attacking for a moment, there are thus few opportunities for D to go on the attack.

Yet, despite our onslaught, we have yet to break through D's defenses.

I doubt this is due to any special skill.

If her words are to be believed, she is simply enduring thanks to her approximate stats supposedly being in the range of a hundred and fifty thousand.

And because it is so simple, it is difficult to circumvent.

The only way to deal with such high defenses would be to break through with an even more powerful attack.

But the maximum value of any stat is 99,999.

It is impossible to reach a value like 150,000 within the constraints of the system.

In other words, the only way we can damage D is to either escape the limitations of the system, or to use a special skill like mine to deal damage that disregards the target's defenses.

Desperation is slowly starting to settle in.

My stamina and MP are limited, you know.

If we keep fighting like this, my attacks are inevitably going to slow down.

And if that happens, we're out of options.

We've got to break through D's defenses before then somehow, or…

"EH?! NO!"

I let my impatience cause a lapse in judgment!

Just as the queen taratects' twin breath attacks hit D, I jumped in while everyone else was at a standstill.

The queens' attacks didn't do any damage to D.

And if she doesn't have to worry about being hurt, she doesn't need to think about defense.

That means that for a moment, she has the option of going on the offensive.

D's eyes meet mine as she turns in my direction.

Her gaze, with pupils so dark it's like I'm being pulled into an abyss, is fixed on me.

Then her swords slash toward me.

"Harmony!"

Just then, all the attacks stop.

The sword passes right through my body without hurting me, as if it has no substance at all.

I don't know what's happening, but now's my chance!

"YAAAAH!"

I unleash all my might in a single punch.

For this first time in this fight, I finally feel a clear impact.

My attack damaged her!

"Conquest!"

Another shout echoes.

In that moment, strength swells throughout my body.

Is this some kind of buff?

"Hey! This won't last long, dammit! Make it count!"

Ah, it's the reincarnation called Natsume.

And the "Harmony" skill before that was invoked by the pontiff.

Are these the secret second skills that come with the ruler titles granted to holders of Seven Deadly Sins or Seven Heavenly Virtues skills?

When you acquire a ruler skill, it automatically grants a corresponding title.

Usually, the first skill that comes with the title is a powerful but standard skill, while the second is a special skill that can only be acquired by gaining the title.

These special skills can only be used if the holder has ruler authority.

And it is best not to invoke them at all.

They are much too powerful, and using them always results in serious recoil for the user as well.

These skills are intended to be used against gods, like my Heresy Attack, Rot Attack, and Abyss Magic skills.

The pontiff's Harmony skill probably nullifies an enemy attack completely.

And judging by this sensation, Natsume's Conquest skill must add the user's stats and skills to the stats and skills of all their allies.

Both are incredibly powerful skills.

As such, they must come with serious consequences.

They used those skills in spite of that in order to create this opening!

Just as Natsume says, we must make it count!

First, the queens' threads wrap around Administrator D and hinder her movements.

Nia's ice freezes over D on top of the threads, pinning her in place completely.

"Root of Evil!"

Sophia uses a skill on top of all that.

This, too, is one of the special skills that accompanies a Seven Deadly Sins skill.

An ominous aura surrounds her broadsword as it strikes Administrator D.

It pulverizes the ice around D, with a shattering sound like the scream of a banshee.

Yet in spite of this powerful attack, D still moves to counterattack against Sophia.

Then a blast of air strikes her: Hyuvan's Wind Magic.

The powerful gust bears down on her, preventing her from moving for just a moment.

Sophia takes that opportunity to jump back, and Wrath leaps into her place.

"Wrath! Enma!"

On top of activating the Wrath skill, he also uses the special skill that came along with its corresponding title.

Blazingly hot flames erupt around Wrath's body, giving him the appearance of some powerful god of judgment.

The flames bear down on Administrator D.

I activate my magic as well.

"Abyss Magic, Hell Gate!"

The darkness of the abyss opens up all around D.

It converges on her, consuming everything.

Invoking Abyss Magic certainly is hard at this point…

The darkness soon evaporates, yet D still stands there alive and well.

One young man dashes toward her.

Why?! He's barely even strong enough to be a part of this battle!

What in the world is he thinking?!

Administrator D turns her blades toward the boy.

“Brother!”

The boy’s sister deflects one of the blades.

But the other yet closes in on the boy’s throat.

“Stupefaction!”

As Natsume shouts out, D freezes in place.

Natsume?! Isn’t that your other special skill?!

Just using one is too great a burden to bear, and now you’re using two at the same time?!

Are you that determined to die?!

“Sword of the Hero!”

But in the opening Natsume created at risk of his life, he bought enough time for an attack from the boy—Schlain the Hero—to reach its mark.

Dazzling light fills the entire area.

The Sword of the Hero is a weapon that can invoke enough power to kill a god, though it can only be used once.

And he hit D directly with that power.

…We’ve won.

“Very impressive.”

Just as our victory seems certain, Administrator D’s voice echoes.

“But I’m afraid that still isn’t enough.”

Then Schlain the Hero collapses in a pool of blood.

“Giving it everything you’ve got is only the bare minimum. You’ll have to find a way to surpass that limit, or I’m afraid I can’t possibly grant you the bonus of saving the world.”

There stands Administrator D, without a single scratch on her.

Ariel 3

Pontiff Dustin, who no one was paying any attention to, since he was the weakest person here—or more accurately, since he fainted right at the beginning of the fight—just changed the entire course of the battle.

His attack-nullifying skill created an opening for Reise to successfully land an attack, followed by a chain of even more attacks.

I wasn't expecting Natsume to be so reckless as to use two special skills in a row, and then Sophia and Wrath took that as a cue to reveal their own special skills for the first time.

On top of that, Yamada used the Sword of the Hero.

He'd been working on the back lines as a combat medic, so I wasn't expecting him to suddenly jump into the fray like that.

We basically hit D with all our trump cards.

And yet she's still standing there…perfectly unharmed.

That doesn't mean we didn't do any damage.

It's just that her wounds were healed instantaneously.

But I guess that's a minor difference, since it leads to the same result in the end.

D being unscathed after that all-out barrage of attacks is more than enough to break everyone's hearts.

D really is holding back for all she's worth.

There's no doubt about that.

If she wasn't, we would've all been killed on the spot no matter what we did.

But even when she's holding back, I don't see any way we can win.

Knowing D, there probably is some specific set of conditions we can meet to achieve victory.

I'm sure she wouldn't just set it up so her wounds heal indefinitely.

Most likely, there's a specific amount of damage that would count as defeating her.

It's not her fault we weren't able to reach that amount.

We had to give it everything we've got, of course.

Only by surpassing that limit and mustering up even more strength would we stand any chance of defeating D.

I'm sure she thinks that's the least we could do if we're trying to get her to save the world.

It would be way too easy if she just agreed to do it for free.

At this point, I have to wonder if the line she drew was actually one we could possibly have achieved or not.

If D truly values fairness, she wouldn't save the world for such a cheap price.

Where does she get off calling this a "bonus stage"?

It's more of a "boss stage," isn't it?

Ugh…

"At this rate, I won't get the chance to say thank you…"

I said before that I would thank White again properly once it was all over.

But it doesn't look like that's going to happen.

"Ael, Sael, Riel, Fiel…thanks for everything. After I die, I want you to keep living strong for me, okay?"

I give my thanks to the puppet taratects instead, not that it makes up for not being able to say it to White.

The puppet taratects shake their heads furiously and cling to my legs.

Are they telling me not to go?

I appreciate the thought, but I have no choice.

As it stands, I only had a year left to live at the most.

So I won't have any regrets about laying it all down here and now.

Well, except my regrets about not getting to say thank you to White, I guess.

I stand up from my chair again.

Oof, that made me dizzy…

Summoning two queen taratects was pretty rough on my body in its weakened state.

That's why even though I was able to stand up at first, I sat

right back down after summoning them and slouched in my chair, watching the battle.

Still, I think that was probably the right call, since it's not like I could've contributed anything to the front lines the way I am now.

I would've liked to keep sitting, to be honest, but I guess that's not an option.

Instead, I wait for the dizziness to fade and for my vision to stop flickering before I begin to walk.

The battlefield has clearly been busy while I was recovering from my dizzy spell: The hero's little sister is going after D in a wild rage with the Sword of the Hero, while Ms. Oka and Hasebe are healing the bloodied Yamada some distance away.

Lying next to Yamada is Ronandt, who's missing an arm.

He probably used Short-Range Teleport to retrieve Yamada, and lost an arm in the process.

Still, it's impressive he was able to rescue Yamada from that situation at all.

…Ah, Dustin's bleeding all over his body.

He must have used Harmony a second time.

Maybe he timed it to match Ronandt's retrieval of Yamada?

No wonder they were able to save him from that obviously hopeless-looking situation.

Both of those old men pushed themselves way too hard.

So did Natsume, for that matter.

He's bleeding all over, just like Dustin.

Neither of them can use their special skills anymore, I bet.

If they do, they'll die.

Yamada is down for the count, too.

Which means we can't depend on him to revive anyone.

Ms. Oka and Hasebe are too busy helping him to heal anyone else, either.

And Ooshima has to stay put to protect the two healers.

Hyrince and Shinohara are out, mostly because they're not strong enough to contribute.

And Balto…is still unconscious. Yeah, fair enough.

That leaves our side with Sophia, Wrath, Byaku, and the Sword of the Hero–wielding little sister, Reise, Hyuvan, Nia, and the two queens.

Also, Merazophis has technically been throwing in long-distance attacks this whole time, not that he stands out much.

With his stats, I don't think his attacks make any real difference, either.

"You guys stay here. You've gotta survive and thank White for me."

I stop the puppet taratects from following me.

They would be valuable allies on the battlefield, too.

But for some reason, I don't want to let them join this fight.

I want them to survive.

"All right. Guess I'll give it a go."

I raise my arms in a stretch.

D is the first to notice that I'm approaching.

"Are you done observing already?"

D easily fends off the little sister's bellowing attack as she looks at me.

"Yeah, I think so. Doesn't look like they can win this without me."

"You realize you're definitely going to die if you join in, right? In fact, your soul will probably be destroyed. You really want to fight anyway?"

"Yeah, why not? I wasn't long for this world anyway."

"I see."

D puts a hand to her forehead in an exaggerated thinking pose.

"YAAAAAAAH!"

The little sister ignores our conversation and keeps charging at D, who basically ignores her.

Now that its power has been used, the Sword of the Hero is just an ordinary sword, albeit a particularly solid one.

Well, I guess the fact that it won't break is still a strength in itself, theoretically speaking.

"Miss Ariel?"

In the meantime, the other fighters besides the hero's sister gather around me.

Wrath, who speaks up first, has painful-looking burns on his skin.

That must be the backlash from using his special skill.

Sophia looks kind of emaciated, too, and is leaning on Merazophis for support.

The ancient dragon chief trio of Reise, Hyuvan, and Nia all look exhausted, visibly panting.

"You guys are a mess."

“Forgive us.”

Wrath looks ashamed as he responds, while Sophia silently bites her lip.

“Can you hang in there for one more push?”

“Of course.”

“Certainly.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.”

Wrath, Sophia, and Merazophis are still up for a fight.

The problem is the ancient dragons.

“What’s up, Reise? Don’t tell me you’ve lost heart?”

“…PERHAPS SO.”

“Don’t be such a wimp. We get to die in this incredible battle. You could at least have the guts to give it your all till the very end and go out with a smile on your face, you know?”

“…YOU’RE RIGHT, OF COURSE. I WAS GOING TO DIE HERE ANYWAY. LET IT BE A GLORIOUS DEATH.”

“Whoo! Now that’s rock-and-roll, baby! Let’s go out in a blaze of glory!”

“…I would really prefer not to, personally.”

One of those responses sounded less than enthused, but I’m just going to ignore it.

As far as I’m concerned, our hearts are united as one!

“Let’s go down fighting, then.”

If I use the Humility skill again, I’m probably going to die.

But I won’t have any regrets as long as I’ve tried everything I could possibly have done.

I’ll burn up everything I’ve got left and give D one last run for her money.

“You never did manage to become a god, in the end. But I must say, your soul shone more valiantly and with more worth than any lesser god.”

“Thanks, I’m honored!”

Now, let’s finish this!

…Wait, what?

Is it me, or are there a bunch of tiny white spiders around D’s feet?

The moment I notice the tiny spiders, space suddenly fractures around them.

And a white silhouette comes flying out of the crack formed in

midair.

The bright shadow swoops directly at D…

And then a tremendous impact shakes the entire battlefield.

White 2

About halfway through my battle with Black, the advantage was beginning to shift to one side.

Nearly half of the world Black created had been overtaken by white spiders.

At that point, it was only a matter of time before the tide turned in my favor.

Black was weaker than I expected, to be honest.

Or I guess I should say he was weak*ened*.

He seems to have used up a lot of energy before the battle even started.

I'm guessing he shoved all of it into the system.

Which means while I was whining about how scary and impossible and stressful this fight was, he was practically running on fumes the whole time.

Yikes, talk about embarrassing!

Sure, Black is a more powerful god than I am, but obviously I can still beat him if he's got barely any energy left in the tank!

In fact, he must not have been taking me very seriously if he thought he could fight me in that condition, huh?

Bwa-ha-ha! You'll pay for that insult with your LIFE!

But just as I was getting all excited by my imminent victory, I noticed some changes back on the ground.

See, before I got tossed into this parallel dimension, I left myself a bit of a backup plan.

Namely, the clone I used to teleport Yamada to the love nest (LOL).

I stuck that little spider to Yamada so I could eavesdrop and sneak peeks on everything he heard and saw.

And what do you know, things got real weird real fast.

First of all, Yamada somehow escaped the love nest (LMAO) lickety-split.

I mean, using a familiar contract connection to teleport to someone? That's not a thing.

Why was the old geezer able to pull off something so insane?

Is that weird or what?

Seriously, it's just plain wrong.

And then Yamada starts in on this stupid, melodramatic "I'll never give up!" nonsense?

I mean, sure, good for you?

Like, yeah, go right ahead! Whatever!

Then he marches right into the Word of God church and meets with the pontiff, and somehow gets some of the ancient dragons on his side.

Um, why?

Then they start wandering around with no real plan in mind, only to conveniently bump into Ms. Oka and the crew, and then you get this whole "The evil god was really D all along!" "Say whaaat?!"

Seriously, whaaat…?

Look, I'm just as surprised as you are.

So that's when I decided to propose a truce with Black.

And so on and so forth.

I'm not a great speaker, you know!

Seriously, it took a long time just to get him to understand that I was saying we should stop fighting!

And then it took even longer to explain WHY!

In the meantime, Yamada and pals had a whole telepathic conference, met up in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, went to the system core, and managed to make their way to D!

Slow down! This is happening too fast!

Have a little consideration for my total inability to explain myself, please!

Especially when I have to do it in the middle of a big epic battle?!

This is waaay too hard!

Are you trying to make me cry?

Not to mention, you realize I put a ton of work into preparing for this fight, right?

Do you have any idea how it feels to have to drop all that and announce a truce when I barely even know what's going on?

For real, do you want me to cry?

Especially when I was all pumped up 'cause I was just about to win?

I could cry! You wanna see me cry? 'Cause I'm gonna cry!

Which is why I'm gonna take all of that rage out on D now.

Seems like justified retaliation to me.

So yeah, hello again, time to die!

I teleport right in front of D's face and hit her with the giant scythe, *BAM!*

Oh, I managed to summon my scythe right before I came here.

If I'd gotten it a little sooner, that would've made my fight with Black a whole lot easier…

But I guess we'll call it even, since I was able to summon it in time to lay the smackdown on D.

I would've liked to wait for the perfect moment to show up all cool-like and save everybody's butt at the last second, except it kinda looked like the Demon Lord was gonna use Humility if I waited any longer.

So I'm just gonna use my super-speed to go *BING, BANG, BOOM!*

Sorry, Ms. D, you don't even get to talk anymore.

Your body regenerates super fast?

Then I'll just have to keep going *BAM!* until you can't regenerate anymore, period!

Hiyah! The *BAM!* won't stop till I see you cry! Got it?!

This scythe is my ultimate weapon, you know!

A single hit would probably be enough to deal some serious damage even to Black, and I'm smacking her with it over and over like it's nothing at all!

Hell, even I would probably die without being able to regenerate or anything under this onslaught, but I'm not letting up.

I doubt it'll be enough to finish off that darn D!

So I'm gonna keep it up anyway just in case it works, camping her body and destroying it again every time she tries to regenerate!

Mwa-ha-ha!

Hope you like getting spawnkilled, 'cause I'm keeping this up until the end of the world!

"I'd really rather you didn't take it *that* far, hmm?"

A voice speaks up behind me.

Okay, let's put a hold on the *BAM!* for now!

D's body somehow disappeared while I was repeatedly turning her into mincemeat.

Dammit, she's good…

Well, I guess this is D's dimension, right?

It's probably not hard to teleport herself around in it.

It's still kinda crazy that she pulled it off without me even noticing, though.

Also, is she casually reading my mind again or what?

"Oh, honestly. I wasn't expecting you to make it all the way here. This place is technically quite far away from that world, you know."

Ah, that makes sense. It was kinda hard to teleport here.

But I was able to use the little clone I stuck on Yamada as a guide to make my way here anyway.

At least you're good for something, Yamada.

I'm still mad at you for messing up my big once-in-a-lifetime battle, though.

Hey, how was that geezer able to teleport all the way to this dimension anyway?

"Why, I made it easier to get here from the system core, of course."

So you ARE reading my mind?!

"Oh well. I suppose this means you've cleared the bonus stage. I received the minimum amount of damage required, after all. And I didn't specify who had to defeat me, so even an intruder like you gets the right to win the bonus. Congratulations."

Looking less than amused, D produces a chair from out of nowhere and sits down.

Wait a minute, that's a gaming chair…

"Umm…what? Okaaaay…"

The Demon Lord is standing there awkwardly, like someone whose target disappeared while her fist was still raised in the air.

I guess that is basically what happened.

But look, you were totally dead set on dying if I didn't show up, weren't you?

I can't be having that, missy.

Be a good girl and live out the rest of your life span, thank you very much.

Look, your daughters are even hanging off your legs like "please don't die, mom"…wait, HELLO?!

Ael, Sael, Riel, Fiel! Where the hell are your outer shells, huh?!

You girls are way too old to be out and about in your birthday suits! Have you no shame?!

I swear, I take my eyes off you people for one second, and suddenly everything gets weird…

"Could you not act like the sane one here when you're the weirdest of all?"

…Is it just me, or are you being a little extra tetchy today, Ms. D?

Are you a little mad, by any chance?

"I'm not mad."

Oh, she's totally mad.

"I said I'm not mad."

Okay, I get it. U mad. U mad, bro. OUGH?!

"That's enough of that, thank you."

What the hell was that?! Something just hit me and I don't even know what it was?!

"Erm…"

While I'm doubled over in agony, someone quietly addresses D.

It's Black.

Yep, he teleported here along with me.

Although he apparently transformed into a scarecrow in the process, since he was just standing there being useless while I laid the beatdown on D.

"Could someone explain what's happening here?"

"What, that thing didn't tell you?"

Great. Now I'm a thing.

"Only bits and pieces. This one refuses to speak to me normally…"

What, so you only got "bits and pieces" out of my desperate attempt to get through to you? I'm hurt, dude.

"Let me explain from the beginning, then."

D proceeds to explain how she was planning to destroy half of humanity, how she offered to save the world if we could defeat her as a bonus for making it all the way here, and so on.

Gotta say, I think saving the world as a "bonus" is a pretty major sign that your priorities are waaay out of whack.

We've all been struggling like crazy to find a way to set the world straight somehow, and D just casually drops that she can fix everything if she feels like it, y'know?

See?! Even Black is staring at her like she's got three heads!

"Well, I suppose I am fairly satisfied, even if I'm not thrilled with how sloppy things got at the end."

Makes sense. It sure seems like she got her kicks, judging by how beat-up Vampy, Mr. Oni, and the others all look.

I mean, Yamada's practically on the verge of death.

It must be that damned Divine Protection of his that made things go so smoothly in such a strange direction, right?

I bet it nudged everything to go along with his stupid "I'm not giving up!" move.

Otherwise it never would've all worked out in such a convenient way.

…I guess I was right to be wary of Yamada.

"Well then, I will set the goddess Sariel free. As for the system, I'll pump energy into it until it reaches its natural end. Everyone's skills and stats should fade away gradually on their own. That ought to keep the negative effects of losing them to a minimum, I'm sure."

"Thank you."

Black bows so deeply, his forehead practically hits the ground.

"Officially, I'll still be in charge of that world, but from this point on I will participate very little. Güliedistodiez, you will take the lead from this point on. I assume you're all right with that?"

"Yes."

"And please don't come crying to me if anything else happens. I got what I wanted out of that world, so I've lost interest. You'll have to protect it on your own."

"…Very well."

"Of course, one single god does not a world make. The creatures that live there also have the power to make it better, or worse. Make sure you don't forget that."

The representatives of humanity nod at this statement from D.

Wait a sec, are the pontiff and Natsume gonna be okay? They're totally soaked in blood…

"All right, this means you've completed the world quest."

<World Quest complete. The world has been saved.>

Looks like she sent out an announcement from the Divine Voice

(temp).

What's more, this will probably be the last time the Divine Voice is ever heard in that world.

"With that, the time has come to say good-bye. I doubt we'll ever meet again, but do take care of yourselves, one and all."

When D finishes speaking, teleportation runes appear beneath everyone's feet but mine.

Hmm? Wait, why don't I get one?

Oh well, that's fine.

I'll just teleport back myself, like so.

"And where do you think you're going? You work for me now."

Come again?

"Congratulations. You've earned the right to officially belong to me as my kin. Please, hold your applause."

Huh? When did I agree to that?

"I told you, didn't I? I have no intention of letting you go."

She grabs my shoulder tightly.

Uh, I don't think I can get out of this one…

Wait a sec! No one told me I'd be saying good-bye to the Demon Lord and everyone else right this second!

Aaaah, no, wait!

The teleportation runes are about to activate?!

"Welp! Thanks for everything, White!"

"Thank YOU!"

I shout my thanks at the top of my lungs, since this is apparently my last chance.

And I wave like crazy, while I'm at it.

The Demon Lord even waves back.

Then the teleportation is complete, and everyone gets sent back to that world.

Leaving me alone with the evil god…

Um, hello?

How come I get stuck with the bad ending?

Everyone's Ever After

After the battle, she and her kin all disappeared without a trace.

It's said that she spent the last of her days in peace with the goddess Sariel.

Sophia

After the battle, she and her kin all disappeared without a trace.

Even in the distant future, there are still stories of a vampire's castle in the frozen lands to the north.

Merazophis

Disappeared along with Sophia.

It is assumed that he continues to serve Sophia along with his junior, Wald.

Wrath

After the battle, he disappeared without a trace.

There is no information whatsoever regarding his whereabouts.

Shun

After the battle, he returned to the Analeit Kingdom and supported former Third Prince Leston, who became the king.

His romantic life from that point on is a mystery, with no known records.

Yuri

After the battle, she returned to the Holy Kingdom of Alleius, brought about a revolution, and reformed the Word of God religion

as the Church of Goddess Sariel.

She was appointed the first pontiff of the Church of Goddess Sariel and devoted herself to its propagation.

Katia

After the battle, she returned to the Analeit Kingdom and resumed her work as a duke's daughter and noblewoman.

It's said she remained good friends as well as rivals with the likes of Princess Suresia and Pontiff Yuri.

Sue

After the battle, she returned to the Analeit Kingdom and supported her brother Schlain.

She is said to have remained unmarried all her life, though there are rumors she had a close relationship with a certain man.

Fei

After the battle, she returned to the Analeit Kingdom and supported her master Schlain.

She would later come to be revered as the guardian divine beast of the Analeit Kingdom.

Hugo

After the battle, he disappeared without a trace.

There is no information whatsoever regarding his whereabouts.

Filimøs

After the battle, she traveled from place to place, gathering persecuted people who inherited the blood of the elves.

She would later construct a "neo" elf village on the location of the old one.

Anna

After the battle, she remained in the Analeit Kingdom and continued to serve Schlain.

She later became the mediator between the Analeit Kingdom and the neo elf village.

Hyrince

After the battle, he returned to the Analeit Kingdom and became a knight, working only as Hyrince.

He eventually became captain of the knights and devoted all his efforts to the kingdom.

Dustin

After the battle, he returned to the Holy Kingdom of Alleius, but never made a complete recovery from his wounds and soon breathed his last.

It is said that the solemn tolling of bells to mourn the loss of a great hero were heard throughout the world that day.

Kunihiko

After the battle, he settled down in the small village of Uppenbebetenia, where he was resting.

He and Asaka married and lived out a rather happy life together.

Asaka

She settled down in the village of Uppenbebetenia with Kunihiko.

They made a modest living from farming and various side jobs, and she obtained quiet happiness.

Shinobu Kusama

After the battle, he returned to the Holy Kingdom of Alleius, where he was forced to become Yuri's underling.

He ended up aiding the revolution, running errands for Yuri once she became the pontiff, and so on.

Ronandt

After the battle, he returned to the Renxandt Empire and continued to work as the head imperial mage.

His research on continuing to use magic even after skills disappeared had an enormous impact on the cultural future of magic.

Aurel

She carried on serving as an imperial mage of the Renxandt Empire without participating in the battle at all.

However, she never married, and continued a life of being dragged into Ronandt's ridiculous experiments.

Balto

After the battle, he returned to the demon territory, and devoted his efforts to rebuilding their race as the leader of demonkind.

His life's work of pursuing peace and reconciliation with humankind had a major influence on future generations.

Sanatoria

She worked as Balto's right-hand woman for a long time, and later married him.

They supported each other both as coworkers and as husband and wife for all their lives.

Darad

He was appointed general commander of the reformed demon army and fought hard to reduce the harm caused by monsters and bandits.

He supported Balto and Sanatoria in both official and personal capacities.

Phelmina

After the battle, she disappeared without a trace, along with the rest of the Tenth Army.

It's said they continued to work behind the scenes as the demon territory's secret service, but the truth of this is unknown.

Other Reincarnations

After the battle, they each walked their own paths through life.

Some found humble happiness, while others later carved their names into history.

Ael, Sael, Riel, Fiel

After the battle, they disappeared without a trace, along with Ariel.

Many long years later, it's said there were rumors of four maids who serve a vampire princess in a castle in the far, frozen north.

Sariel

After the battle, Ariel brought her along when she disappeared without a trace.

Only they can say how they spent the remainder of their lives together.

Güliedistodiez

After the battle, he spent some amount of time with Sariel and Ariel.

None have seen him since, but it's said he still watches over the world with the surviving ancient dragons.

Reise

After the battle, they disappeared along with Güliedistodiez and the others.

It has been said that Reise still secretly lives among humans.

Hyuvan

After the battle, he disappeared along with Güliedistodiez and the others.

Some say you can still occasionally catch sight of a dragon soaring through the skies at impossible speeds.

Nia

After the battle, she disappeared along with Güliedistodiez and the others.

There may or may not be a dragon who sleeps the day away in a castle in the frozen lands to the north.

Byaku

After the battle, he disappeared along with Güliedistodiez and the others.

Rumor has it that he still travels the world in search of a hero

worthy of wielding the holy sword.

The Nightmare's Vestiges

They continued to build up a unique ecosystem as a monster species, and reign at the top of the Great Elroe Labyrinth's food chain.

They became established as their own line and continued to produce offspring for generations to come.

Epilogue

Beautiful blossoms fill the garden with their enchanting presence.

Two women sit at a table in the center of the garden, enjoying an elegant teatime.

One is D.

The other is a woman wearing a maid outfit with the air of a classic Japanese beauty.

I've started calling this mysterious person Ms. Meido.

She's probably a super-powerful god, too.

"So, I take it you went to the trouble of saving that world?"

"I did."

"You do love to do things in the most roundabout way, don't you…?"

Ms. Meido heaves a sigh of exasperation.

"Whatever is the point of providing so much energy to a world like that? You really are terribly wasteful, too…"

"Oh, it wasn't wasteful."

Ms. Meido's phrasing might sound awful to the people who live in that world, but from a god's perspective, it's a planet that practically self-destructed.

Only someone with extremely strange taste would bother trying to recycle a place like that.

"I barely provided any energy of my own, after all."

"…Then where did all that energy come from?"

"Isn't it obvious? From the dragons who tried to desert the planet, of course."

"You mean…you killed those dragons back then?"

"Yes."

Another shocking truth bomb.

D killed all of Black's former brethren.

So what does that mean?

Was the system made using the energy those dragons tried to steal from the planet in the first place?

Then she basically just put it back the way it was!

“Those dragons made for excellent energy, too.”

Correction.

She put the dragons through the grinder and turned them into energy, too.

It was even worse than I thought.

“That’s all well and good for when you made that so-called system, I suppose. But where did you get the energy you provided them this time?”

“Funny story, actually. It came from that world itself.”

Ms. Meido tilts her head uncertainly.

“That world had a surprising amount of energy stored up. And a whole lot more of it came gushing out of nowhere toward the end.”

“Because of the world quest?”

“Exactly. The fighting frenzy that the world quest brought on resulted in new energy being supplied at an unprecedented rate. Many lives were lost, and everyone was battling desperately, since the fate of the world was on the line, which all seems to have resulted in more energy being produced from their souls.”

So even though D held all the cards in the end, the battle over that world quest wasn’t actually for nothing, I guess.

“Nothing shines brighter than a soul trying to accomplish something even if it means death.”

The fight against D, too, was full of such determination that everyone created a lot of energy in the process.

Souls sure are mysterious, though.

They can produce energy from nothing.

Maybe if Potimas had researched the energy of souls instead of MA energy, it wouldn’t have led to the planet’s destruction.

Then again, if he researched souls, he probably would’ve created freaky super-organisms or something.

Either way, knowing Potimas, it wasn’t gonna end well no matter what.

“That still wasn’t enough, though, was it?”

“Not quite. But it so happens that someone had the rest of the energy set aside. So I decided to step in and lend it on her behalf.”

At this, Ms. Meido’s gaze turns toward me.

In case you were wondering, I'm standing to the side behind D at the moment.

Also, she has me wearing a maid outfit. A maid outfit.

I said it twice 'cause it's a very important detail.

Seriously, why a maid outfit?

Between this and Ms. Meido, does D have a thing for maids or what?

Then again, I guess maybe it makes sense, since I'm also being forced to do actual maid work by waiting on their little tea party! ARGH!

"You see, by this one's calculations, between the energy produced by her fight with Güliedistodiez being restored to the system, then squeezing out as much energy from Güliedistodiez as possible without killing him, and finally draining almost all of her own energy, she would've been able to restore the planet while still protecting humanity."

"Were those calculations correct?"

"Yes, indeed."

Oops, ya got me.

…Yeah, okay, she's right.

I wasn't planning on killing half of humanity in the first place.

For one thing, who knows what Goddess Sariel would've done if I did that?

Her thought process seems to be totally different from that of the rest of us, and I'm not a big fan of uncertain variables.

If the Demon Lord did all that work for Goddess Sariel, only for the goddess to let it all go to waste or something, wouldn't that go straight past sad to super pissed off?

Ah, I'm the one who'd be pissed, by the way.

Not for humanity or Sariel or anything like that.

I was just gonna go a little overboard to save humanity for the Demon Lord's sake, that's all.

Whew, I gotta admit, I'm a little too attached to my grandmother (if you can call her that) for my own good.

"Incidentally, this one was also planning to play dead after doing all that."

…Oops, got me again.

"Play dead? Whatever for?"

"To get away from me, of course. She'd make it look like she died so she could make a break for it."

Umm, is anyone else sweating? Just me?

"This little scamp was plotting to escape from my clutches even though she knew she'd be much weaker after losing most of her energy, if you can believe it. I can't let that slide, now, can I?"

Uh-oh…

"You've got to keep such a badly behaved creature on a tight leash, you see?"

"…So that's why you're keeping her close at hand like this."

Ms. Meido looks at me with an almost pitying expression.

If you feel that bad for me, help me out here!

"Right now she's still the world's saddest little sea slug in terms of strength, just absolutely no use at all… But she managed to become a god in record time, so I'm sure she'll work her way up to the upper echelon in no time. Now there's a talent worth training, don't you think? I've already planned out a very special crash course so that I can see to her upbringing personally."

Noooo!

That's gonna be the training from hell, isn't it?!

Are you trying to kill me or what?!

"So I couldn't have her weakening herself like that. It would have hindered my special training plans."

Yeah, I don't care!

In fact, it would've been better that way!

"At any rate, that's why I decided to provide energy to that world as a sort of advance payment for this one's salary."

"I see. So you consider it the price of purchasing your new toy."

…So you view me as a toy, too, huh, Ms. Meido? I see how it is.

But since she saw right through my plan to use up my energy and play dead, I doubt I'm gonna be able to get away from her now.

Oh, what fate awaits our beloved heroine, aka me?!

"You seem to have taken quite a liking her."

"Yes, you might say that."

"Speaking of which, I still haven't heard the sordid details of her history. Tell me, what *is* she exactly?"

Oh, c'mon. You really gotta ask?

So I'm a spider, so what?

Afterword

Hello, I'm Okina Baba, who created this series.

Yes, the series has finally reached a conclusion of sorts.

I might still write side stories and such, so I'll hold off on calling this "the end."

But it's definitely hit a major stopping point.

The first volume came out in December 2015, meaning it's been about six years.

Six whole years?! I'm surprised, too.

Those six years flew by in the blink of an eye.

But looking back, they were actually very eventful.

Of course there are major milestones like the manga adaptation, the spin-off manga, and the anime adaptation, but there were also so many smaller events that I can't list them all here.

Then again, I guess the fact that they were so action-packed is probably why those years went by so fast.

Yes, so fast that I seem to remember constantly wondering, *Am I going to finish this in time?* as I wrote each volume…

Which is why, rather than feeling like "it's over!" with a sense of accomplishment, or even "it's over…" with a certain sadness, I feel burned-out to the point that my mind is a total blank.

Heh…heh-heh…now that this series is over, I'd better rest for a little while…

But, well, if I rest for too long, I might get rusty, so once I've had enough of a break I'll get right back to writing.

In fact, since I still have some other jobs to do, I won't really be taking a break from writing at all…

Still, I'm sure I'll have a little bit of leeway soon!

Definitely, probably, maybe.

Now then, this *So I'm a Spider, So What?* series originally started as a web novel.

When I first started serializing it online, my one and only goal

was to write it all the way to completion.

I wasn't thinking about getting it published as a novel, or even paying much attention to the view counts, points, and all that.

The most I ever dreamed of was that it might become a cult classic of sorts when it was finished, popular only among those in the know.

Instead, I got a big positive reaction relatively soon after starting the series, and next thing you know, the novelization was set into motion.

It was such a huge change that part of me couldn't even keep up.

I mean, it's a story about getting reincarnated as a spider.

We're talking about the already small niche of monster reincarnation, and this is even more niche than that.

Since I went in assuming no one was even gonna read it, my expectations were totally upended in the best way possible.

And then the novelization. What? Are you crazy?

And then the manga adaptation. What? Are you crazy?

And then the spin-off manga. What? Are you crazy?

And then the anime. What? Are you crazy?

Yep, I really thought that way every single time something happened! Seriously!

In fact, when the editor-in-chief at the time first proposed the novelization, my very first question was: "Umm, if it doesn't sell, how many volumes do you think it'll last before it gets canceled?"

Clearly, it never got canceled, and now here we are at the final volume.

I don't think I ever would've made it this far without the support of a lot of people. I'm incredibly grateful.

From here on, I'd like to write some thank-yous. Since this is technically the last volume and all, I hope you don't mind if they're a little longer than usual.

Firstly, to my illustrator, Tsukasa Kiryu-sensei.

Kiryu-sensei became the illustrator for this series because I fell in love with their art at first sight and told the editor at the time, "I want this person, please." Luckily, we contacted Kiryu-sensei and got the okay.

To be honest, at that point, I already couldn't imagine the illustrations being done by anyone but Kiryu-sensei. I didn't know what we were going to do if they didn't agree!

To this day, I can't imagine anyone else illustrating this series.

Kiryu-sensei's illustrations and designs were so vital to the story that I don't think I could have told it without them.

Thank you so much to Kiryu-sensei for illustrating *So I'm a Spider, So What?*

Next, to Asahiro Kakashi-sensei, the manga artist.

To be perfectly honest, when I first heard the series was getting a manga adaptation, I was more nervous than excited.

It's already hard enough to adapt a novel into a manga, and in this case the protagonist is a spider.

Spiders don't move like humans, you know…and they don't look like humans, either…

There's no way any normal manga artist would have a lot of experience drawing something in this realm.

On top of that fundamental artistic problem, the story itself wasn't very well-suited to a manga adaptation, either.

Explaining skills and stats and so on is fun in a novel, but not so easy to depict in a comic…

But Kakashi-sensei blew away all of my various concerns.

Just look at that bold redesign that veers so far from Kiryu-sensei's redesigns in order to be viable for a manga protagonist.

And the art that uses this redesign to the fullest.

Then there's the explanations of skills and stats, told in such a wild variety of ways that the reader never gets bored.

How can one artist have so many talents?

I'm so glad that Kakashi-sensei is the one in charge of the manga adaptation!

Thank you so much!

The manga will still continue, so please keep reading it, too!

Speaking of manga, there's also the spin-off manga by Gratinbird-sensei.

Here I was wondering what a spin-off manga could possibly entail, and the answer turned out to be totally wacky: The protagonist gets split into four sisters right from the start.

Then I wondered how the story could possibly stay fresh when chronologically it can only take place inside the Great Elroe Labyrinth, only for things to get even crazier than the initial concept.

How can another artist have so many talents?

I know I said the same about Kakashi-sensei, but in Gratinbird's

case, the story is self-sufficient, too. That makes it even more surprising.

The surprises and laughs keep coming with every new chapter.

Truly, thank you so much! Please continue to read the spin-off, too!

Thank you to Director Itagaki and everyone else who was involved in the anime adaptation.

It's thanks to all of you that the anime made it to completion in spite of all the setbacks and such during the production.

I'll never forget how emotional I felt when I saw Kumoko moving on the screen.

Thank you very much!

To my editor Ms. W, and my former editor Mr. K.

Mr. K first picked up my story, and Ms. W saw it through to completion.

I'm sure it was far from perfect in many ways, but it's thanks to the backup from both of you that I made it all this way.

I can't thank you enough!

And finally, to everyone who picked up this book, and this series.

A novel lives only because of its readers.

Thank you all so much for reading this series!

I hope we meet again somewhere, in some way! Until then!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

1. Cover
2. Insert
3. Title Page
4. Copyright
5. Ariel 1
6. White 1
7. Shun 1
8. Balto
9. Sophia
10. Kusama
11. Phelmina
12. Merazophis
13. Kunihiko
14. Asaka
15. Wrath
16. Filimøs
17. Shun 2
18. Ariel 2
19. Dustin
20. Hyrince
21. Ronandt
22. Fei
23. Shun 3
24. Dark Dragon Reise
25. Ariel 3
26. White 2
27. Everyone's Ever After
28. Epilogue
29. Afterword
30. Yen Newsletter